What Welfare Recipients and the Fathers of Their Children Are Saying about Welfare Reform

A report on 15 focus group discussions in Baltimore, Boston, and Chicago
This is the first report from a larger project, “Welfare Reform and Children: A Three-City Study.” The project will gather longitudinal data in three cities, Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio, on poor families with children (half receiving welfare) and follow the children and their parents for four years as welfare reform evolves. The co-investigators of the larger project are Ronald Angel, Linda Burton, P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Andrew J. Cherlin, Robert Moffitt, and William Julius Wilson. The project has three interrelated components:

1. Longitudinal surveys of 2,800 families that include assessments of family and child functioning;
2. A developmental study of a subset of 800 families involving videotaped parent-child interactions, observations at child care settings, time-diary studies, and interviews with fathers and father figures; and

The focus groups on which this report is based were conducted under the direction of Linda Burton of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Pennsylvania State University, to provide preliminary information on how current and former welfare recipients, and fathers whose children may be receiving welfare benefits, are experiencing welfare reform. We would like to acknowledge the assistance of Frank Avenilla, Romney Norwood, Shermann Robertson, Tasha Snyder, Karen Hayward West, and Estelle Young. Photographs are by Michael Palmieri and Jason Yarrington. For further information, consult the project’s web site, www.jhu.edu/~welfare/, send an e-mail message to welfare@jhu.edu, or contact Andrew Cherlin, Department of Sociology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, 21218, telephone 410-516-7626.

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Fifteen focus group interviews were conducted in Baltimore, Boston, and Chicago between November 1996 and November 1997, with women who were current and former welfare recipients and with men who were familiar with the welfare system. Seven focus groups consisted of African Americans, six consisted of Hispanics (and were conducted in Spanish), one consisted of whites, and one had a mixture of whites and African Americans. Eleven groups were all female and four were all male.

We asked the participants what they had heard about the changes in welfare and what they thought about these changes. We discussed time limits, work requirements, measures to discourage additional births, and provisions to increase child support. The participants were asked to say what they thought the impact of the changes would be. In addition, they were asked what messages about the welfare changes they would give to lawmakers.

- Nearly all participants knew about the time limits on the receipt of welfare, and most knew about work requirements for persons receiving welfare. But they did not know all the details of the new programs.
- Hispanics knew, in general, that the new law restricted assistance to immigrants, and many were upset about it.
- The majority of the participants favored time limits on welfare receipt. This was true among African Americans, Hispanics, and whites and among women and men. They viewed the new provisions as providing them with the motivation to find jobs and improve their lives. Still, some people qualified their support by saying that some parents needed longer to make the transition to work and others needed long-term public assistance. And some were scared or angry.
- Participants cited many examples of abuse of the welfare system, but they dissociated themselves and other people who truly need it from the abusers.
- Participants expressed qualified support for work requirements for welfare recipients, as long as exceptions were made for parents who could not find adequate child care or had children with special needs.
Many Hispanics thought time limits and work requirements were fine for people who are legally in the country and can get good jobs. But illegal immigrants whose American-born children were receiving welfare were very worried about work requirements. They feared being separated from their children if they were caught at a job by immigration officers and deported.

Participants emphasized the importance of the non-cash benefits that welfare recipients receive, notably Medicaid and child care assistance. Many even argued that the non-cash benefits were more important than the cash benefit.

A majority of the participants favored “family cap” provisions that deny increases in cash assistance to mothers who have an additional child while already receiving welfare.

Participants criticized as anti-family some child support enforcement measures that pressure men to acknowledge paternity but may actually reduce the amount of support mothers on welfare receive from fathers.

The relationships between mothers on welfare and the fathers of their children were often characterized by a lack of trust. Both women and men were concerned that the new system, with its emphasis on work, would alter the power balance between women and men.

When asked about the likely impact of welfare reform, participants responded in both positive and negative terms. Although they predicted increased personal responsibility, they also predicted increased crime and family hardships.

When asked what advice they would give to the President and to state officials, participants asked for more time to make the transition, for more child care, educational, and training assistance, for continued medical coverage, and for help learning English.

On balance, the predominant tone of the focus group interviews was cautious optimism—surprisingly so, given that welfare recipients face the threat of time limits and sanctions. Although many participants were concerned that they would not be able to move into the work world, they seemed willing to try if government agencies would provide them with what they viewed as necessary assistance.
mid the debates about the 1996 welfare reform bill, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), and its aftermath, the voices of the people most affected—welfare recipients and the fathers of their children—have rarely been heard. A steady stream of policy-makers, social commentators, and academics have speculated on how welfare reform will affect parents and children. But in truth, no one can predict with confidence how individuals will experience the complex new welfare system that is still emerging, two years after the Federal legislation. It is a system that differs from state to state, and within a state it often differs from county to county. It may be experienced differently by people from different racial and ethnic groups.

In order to learn how individuals in low-income families are experiencing welfare reform, we conducted focus group interviews in three cities, Baltimore, Boston, and Chicago, between November 1996 and November 1997. The focus groups were also intended to help us design a larger project, “Welfare Reform and Children: A Three-City Study,” which will begin this summer.1 The project will comprise longitudinal household-based surveys of parents and children and ethnographic field studies of a smaller number of families in the same neighborhoods as the families in the survey. In addition, about one-third of the families in the survey will be observed more intensively, through videotaped parent-child interactions, observations at child care settings, time-diary studies, and interviews with fathers or father figures.

We have chosen to concentrate our resources on just three cities because the substantial state and local variation in welfare reform makes it difficult to gain a full understanding through geographically extensive national studies that provide less detail on each area. In addition, we want to conduct ongoing ethnographic research that is grounded in a thorough analysis of the neighborhood resources poor families can draw upon—an analysis that would not be feasible in a national study. Because of the great variation in state plans, our conclusions cannot be generalized to the nation as a whole. Nevertheless, we believe the findings will be of broad interest.

We report here on 15 focus groups, seven in Boston, four in Baltimore, and four in Chicago. Each group was composed of about 12 participants, on average, who were each paid $20. The two-hour sessions took place in

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1 For information about the project, see our Web site, www.jhu.edu/~welfare/, or send an E-mail message to welfare@jhu.edu.
community centers and service organizations, which helped recruit the participants. We selected poor- or working-class neighborhoods with moderate-to-high rates of welfare participation. Seven focus groups consisted of African Americans, six consisted of Hispanics (and were conducted in Spanish), one consisted of whites, and one had a mixture of whites and African Americans. In Boston, Puerto Ricans are the largest Hispanic group, followed by Dominicans, whereas in Chicago Mexican Americans are the largest group, followed by Puerto Ricans. We did not conduct a Hispanic focus group in Baltimore because of its small Hispanic population.

Eleven groups were all female and four were all male. Group moderators were matched for race/ethnicity and gender. Seven of the 11 groups of women consisted almost entirely of current recipients of TANF/AFDC. The other four groups contained a mixture of current recipients, women who had received welfare previously, and a small number who had never received welfare. The average ages of the 11 groups ranged from 21 to 36. The two groups of Hispanic men were conducted at the same sites as the corresponding groups of Hispanic women; and the two African-American groups of men were conducted in neighborhoods similar to those where the groups of African-American women met. A few men in the groups were receiving welfare because they had custody of their children. Many of the others had children living elsewhere whose mothers were receiving welfare. The average ages of the groups were 32 (Baltimore, African American), 26 (Boston, African American), 39 (Boston, Hispanic), and 32 (Chicago, African American).

All interviews were conducted after the passage of PRWORA in August, 1996. Maryland has implemented the standard PRWORA five-year lifetime limit on welfare receipt. Massachusetts has a time limit of 24 months of receiving welfare in any five-year period. The Illinois plan will not count toward the five-year limit any month in which a recipient is working, instead, benefits during a period of work will be paid out of state funds. The focus groups were conducted before any recipients in the three cities had exceeded time limits, although states were enforcing the new rules and dropping families from the rolls for noncompliance. Their responses, therefore, reflected their understanding in an early phase of the post-PRWORA welfare world.

We started with one focus group in each city between November 1996 and January 1997. The other 12 focus groups were conducted between May and November of 1997. Table 1 lists the city, race/ethnicity, and gender of the participants, and date of interview for each focus group.

We asked the participants what they had heard about the changes in welfare and what they thought about these changes. We discussed time limits, work requirements, measures to discourage additional births, and provisions to increase child support. The participants were asked to say what they thought the impact of the changes would be. In addition, they were asked what messages about the welfare changes they would give to lawmakers.
early all participants knew about the time limits on the receipt of welfare, and most knew about work requirements for persons receiving welfare. But they did not know all the details of the new programs.

Knowledge of the changes  
Virtually everyone in the focus groups knew that under the new welfare system, a family could only receive benefits for a limited time period:

After 60 months you’re cut off, you cannot get it anymore in your life. I don’t care if you got kids, I don’t care if you ain’t got a place to live, none of that, you cannot get social service [the term used for welfare in Baltimore] anymore.  (African-American man with custody of his child, Baltimore)

There was also widespread knowledge of work requirements:

After 60 days you have to, if you have kids over two, you have to show that you are actively looking for work and/or getting into some kind of community/volunteer work. (African-American man, Boston)

Most participants were also aware of “family cap” provisions that denied increases in assistance to parents who give birth to another child while on the welfare rolls:

If you have another child you don’t get it because that child doesn’t go on. You just get food stamps and medical assistance, but there is no cash. (African-American woman, Boston)

Even men were aware of “family cap” provisions:

My girl, she was trying to have another baby, right? But they told her if she have another baby that she won’t get no welfare for that second baby. So I said that didn’t sound right, so I said, never mind that. (African-American man, Baltimore)

A: There was a time where a woman had a kid, you got more money for that one kid?
B: They stopped that yeh, right.
A: That’s not working anymore.  (African-American men, Baltimore)

Men also knew that the new system strengthened paternity establishment and enforcement of child support obligations, as this conversation shows:

A: If you have children and go on welfare, and if you don’t tell the name of the father and the Social Security number, then they aren’t going to give you welfare.
B: The new law is that if the person doesn’t give the name of the papa of the child, they can’t give her money or help…. In other words, they give her help but they are making the father give her child support.  (Hispanic men, Boston)

Beyond this basic knowledge, some—though not all—participants knew about other features of the changes. For example, some knew accurate information about the income disregard for recipients who were also working:

For every three dollars that you make, you get to keep two and they get one. (African-American woman, Chicago)

Some had perceived the greater emphasis on work itself, rather than education and training, in the new system:

And now they saying, they don’t care about you going to school, you need a GED, that’s your problem, you should have got it a long time ago. They want you to work. (African-American woman, Baltimore).

Nevertheless, the discussions showed that many people had inaccurate information about the details of the programs. In Massachusetts, for example, families can only receive benefits for two years in any five-year period. Therefore, recipients who exceed 24 months on the rolls must wait another three years before reapplying. Some Boston participants, however, misunderstood this rule, such as the African-American woman who said:

What they are telling you after two years is that you got to wait five more years before you can apply. (African-American woman, Boston)
Most Hispanic participants knew, generally, that PRWORA restricted benefits to immigrants. Some saw the new laws as an attack on immigrants or an attempt to compensate for a failed immigration policy:

They are attacking from one side and from the other. They are cutting [benefits], they are making immigration laws more difficult. They are surrounding us. They are taking away welfare, they are taking away medical services, they are taking away the possibility to straighten out our status here. You can see how, and it’s not that you are paranoid or anything like that, but the culture is now taking advantage of the immigrant worker. (Hispanic man, Chicago)

[The government] could not control the illegal influx coming into the country. In other words, a multitude of undocumented people have come into the country, outside the law. So now they have taken away the rights of the ones who are [already] here, for all practical purposes have lived our youth here. Why? But it is not our fault that all these multitudes of undocumented people have come in to this country. It is the fault of those who control immigration, the laws, the borders, and the laws of this country. (Hispanic man, Boston)

Another commented on the provision in PRWORA that denied Supplemental Security Income payments to elderly immigrants:

Look, in this country, to go from a provider nation, a humanitarian nation, to a nation with, unfortunately, a criminal nation that is killing the elderly, as you have watched on television, who have been living here for 40 years, they don’t speak any English, they are not American citizens and can’t become [citizens] because they do not know the laws —so they take away their help. (Hispanic man, Boston)

A focus group of Hispanic women in Boston, a mixture of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and immigrants from other countries, discussed the restrictions. They were misinformed about the effects on Puerto Ricans. Because Puerto Ricans are United States citizens from birth, the immigrant restrictions do not apply to them. Yet no one in the group seemed to know this distinction:

A: I have heard many times that welfare is attacking the immigrants. If is as if welfare does not want to help the immigrants. That’s the reason why all these changes are happening, because welfare is against the immigrants.

Moderator: Which group do you think is affected the most?

Group (many people talking): Us, the Hispanics.

Moderator: Yes, but among us, the Hispanics, there are Puerto Ricans, Dominicans . . .

Group: All of us.

Moderator: All of the groups? No exceptions?

Group: No, no, no.

Moderator: If a person just arrived from Puerto Rico last week, do they have the same problems, too?

Group: There are no differences. They treat them the same.
he majority of the participants favored time limits on welfare receipt. This was true among African Americans, Hispanics, and whites and among women and men. They viewed the new provisions as providing them with the motivation to find jobs and improve their lives. Still, some people qualified their support by saying that some parents needed longer to make the transition to work and others needed long-term public assistance. And some were scared or angry.

**Time limits and work requirements**

When we asked focus group participants how they felt about time limits, a majority of people in almost every focus group spoke positively, at least in the abstract:

When they put the welfare reform to me, it was like I don’t have time to be not motivated, you know, I have to take care of my kids regardless of what happens around me or who decides to help me or who doesn’t. I am responsible for my kids, and it did give me that extra push that just makes you realize that you got to get up and that you just can’t sit here no more and that “time is a wasting.” *(African-American woman, Boston)*

Two years is long enough for you to get moving and go to some kind of school. That is plenty of time for you to go out and look for a job if you get up and look just about every day. I think two years is plenty of time. *(African-American man, Boston)*

The purpose of welfare, most people seemed to agree, was to provide temporary help to those in need:

Welfare is to help you. It, they brought it about to help us to stand, to stand out a little more until we can do better. It wasn’t meant for us to stay on for years and years and years. It wasn’t meant for that. It was meant for us to stay on for a short period of time and go look for jobs like they’re trying to make us do now. *(African-American woman, Chicago)*

The metaphor of a “stepping stone” was used by several participants:

Me, I had a very good job and left an abusive relationship and because I left my job I needed like a stepping stone and something to help me and assist me like in direction. So it gave me the tools and the opportunity to like go back to school and with child care and stuff like that. *(African-American woman, Boston)*

Nevertheless, some participants did see value in time-unlimited welfare and were critical of across-the-board time limits:

In my opinion, one part of that is good because there are still a lot of people who don’t need welfare and are getting it, and I think that gives them a time limit. Those people will have to get off it. They will have to do something. And on the other [hand], there are many people who do need it for real and they are the ones who will suffer. *(Hispanic man, Chicago)*

Welfare, I guess the media portrays it as just like a crutch for people who don’t want to work. I don’t think that is totally true. I think that is true for some people, but I think some people actually do need it and it is a good help. I don’t know any people personally who are just using it, so I think they are doing their job. *(African-American man, Boston)*

I just don’t think they should cut it all the way for people that need it. Some people don’t have family. *(African-American man, Boston)*

Some were ambivalent about their own use of welfare and cautiously optimistic about their prospects under welfare reform:

I think that welfare is a way to provide when you don’t have another option. However, I feel somewhat entrapped by it. I definitely wonder if it was the best thing to do at the time that I did it. I have been on it for about 12 years, too. My daughter is 12 and I think that you just get caught up in a cycle of it. You just can’t get out of it. *(White woman, Boston)*
Five years is long enough time to get some type of degree or something. You have to pick up your life and go on. . . . And I think it might be hard . . . it’s going to affect me, but I’m not gonna let it get me down, just do what I have to do and go on. (African-American woman, Baltimore)

Some of the more poignant personal stories that participants told mixed appreciation for the help welfare can provide with an acknowledgment of the dependency that time-unlimited welfare can create and a sense of anxiety about too quickly being thrust into the work world. For example:

I was working a full-time job when I was pregnant with my son. I graduated out of high school. I was in secretarial school. I had an excellent job. When my son was born, he was FTT, failure to thrive, and he was very sick. For me, I did go on...maternity leave for a long time, and that was excellent money. Then I had to turn to unemployment.... It kind of stunk because I had no medical benefits and so when my son was about almost a year old, I had no choice. I was like listen I need medical benefits; I need something... It kind of got pretty scary because I had to leave my home and move into my mother's home and I thought that would work. I ended up in a shelter with my son being very sick. I mean sort of thank God that welfare was there, but also I think I have been entrapped by it because I have a lot of skills that I am very good at and I am glad that I am in school. I am very glad that I am able to be with my kid, but I don't really feel fully complete.... We were just informed about the 24-month notice, but actually my welfare worker just told me that mine is going to run out this November. Then I signed a paper, so I am kind of scared because I don't know what is going to happen... she basically told me I need to finish school now.... I should just drop out of school and go to a training program because with my credits that I have now, I should get a decent job. So go get a job and forget welfare. I left there crying because she told me that I had no choice but to get off of welfare. (white woman, Boston)

Others advocated a more individualized limit:

I think that they shouldn't have made it such a blanket statement. They should have taken into consideration the amount of time that people have been on it. They should have said there is going to be a time limit and then address families differently based on the number of years that they have been on, the ages of their children, and their level of experience. (African-American woman, Boston)

Don't just put a two-year limit on every person because everyone's situation is entirely different. Because if a person has been on it for seven years, two years isn't going to make a difference, but that person who is motivated and wants to do something, if they do have that six-month-old child, two years is not going to be enough time. I think that they should evaluate each person's personal situation. (African-American woman, Boston)

Some suggested not only more time to make the transition but also a gradual, as opposed to abrupt, exit:

So put em all back to work but just don’t cut em off at the knees . . . like okay, if you go to work, okay they put you back to work, sure okay, [they should] still give you something partial til you start getting those paychecks. Okay. You’re gonna get a check for about two, three months, then when you get on your feet and all, then . . . they’ll ease you into it, you know what I’m saying? (African-American man, Baltimore)

Finally, a minority expressed strong fear or anger over the time limits:

I am so afraid, I can’t do this in two years. My baby is sick and in the hospital all the time. I don’t have any help. I have to take care of my mother and my little brother, too. I’m afraid! I’m afraid! (African-American woman, Boston)

I want to know, how they expect you to get public aid for a certain amount of time and then automatically they cut you off? What do they really think you’re going to do for that other time? Where are you going to get the money to support or live? . . . I don’t understand how they calculate giving you money for a certain amount of time and then the rest of the time they cut you off, I mean, you got kids, mouths to feed, especially if you are a large family. You got mouths to feed. You got bodies to clothe, you know, I don’t understand that. (African-American woman, Chicago)
Participants cited many examples of abuse of the welfare system, but they dissociated themselves and other people who really need it from the abusers.

I have seen a lot of people who went to [the welfare office] with many jewels, new fur coats, they leave and they go in their Cadillac... We, the truly needy, have no money to take the bus to school. (working-poor, Hispanic woman, Chicago)

A lot of mothers are out there who are waiting for that AFDC to not only take care of their children but a lot parents out there spend it on the wrong things, like drugs, alcohol, or whatever. Some of the parents like those kinds don’t need it, but there are some people out there who do need it. (African-American man, Boston)

I think that the reform is good... because the people who do have that motivation to use the welfare system as a stepping stone, they are going to do it. It is going to wean those people out that have four and five kids, who keep having kids, who just keep telling stories, they don’t know who the baby’s father is, and all of this and that. It is going to make them either lose out or they are going to go on.... I don’t know the whole deal that it is going on with this right now, but I think that it is good. (African-American woman Boston)
For example, some participants expressed the opinion that women with preschool-aged children or ill or handicapped children should be allowed to stay home:

Well, I think it is good if your kids are older, but if you still have young kids it is going to be harder and you are going to have to find day care and everything. (white woman, Boston)

I think is a good change. But it depends of the mother’s situation. If it is a mother who has a handicapped child, they should not make her go to work. But if it is a mother without any problems, they should offer day care services that they have, and yes, indeed, they should demand it. (Hispanic woman, Boston)

I say it’s right. But for the people who don’t have sick children like I do. I have sick children . . . with asthma. I cannot work. (Hispanic woman, Chicago)

It is good for the mothers who have grown children, adolescents. They can go to work and the children stay home quietly [without getting in trouble]. But not the mothers who have small children, and they cannot leave them all day in a day care... In this country it is very hard to leave the children alone because there is a lot of abuse. (Hispanic woman, Boston)

In fact, several parents expressed concern and suspicion about out-of-home child care and argued that young children would be better off if their mothers could stay home with them:

Then it’s going to be an issue about “we’ll cut you off.” Get a job, we’ll cut you off like that. My child, I’m not going to leave my child. Not no four-year-old. Worrying about if somebody is doing something to him and if he going to tell me or if they scared him so much where he can’t, you know. (African-American woman, Chicago)

You were asking about… what we liked about the old system…. they waited ‘til your child was five before they started, you know, to make you go to work and stuff. Now they just want you to, right after you have a baby they start sending you letters like Earnfare Program, you know what I’m saying… me, myself I’m not just going to leave my baby with anybody, you know. I’m not going to do it. (African-American woman, Chicago)

I prefer to be at home with my children and be there with them, rather than to be at a job and they are like raising themselves alone or with strangers, or with people who I don’t know how they are treating them... because not everyone has family that gives them help. Many women are here alone, and they really don’t have a place to go, or someone to help them, or someone to lend them a hand. (Hispanic woman, Chicago)

As for work requirements for welfare recipients, participants expressed qualified support, as long as exceptions were made for parents who could not find adequate child care or who had children with special needs.
Illegal immigrant parents of American-born children feared looking for a job because if they were caught at work by immigration, they might be deported, but their American-born children would stay in the United States—perhaps without adequate care:

If you go and look for a job, and you leave your children, and you have no papers, you are risking being caught by Immigration, and your children here, and you over there. [Your children] With the “babysitter” who is not a family member or anything and so they are putting you between a rock and a hard place. (Hispanic woman, Chicago)

My only preoccupation is... Like me, I’m illegal. If they find me a job and those [agents] go and do a raid and they take me, who will my children stay with here, you know? (Hispanic woman, Chicago)

But for the persons whose children were born here, but they don’t have papers, they can’t look for a good job, I think that they should not be expected to look for other options [if they can’t get welfare]. They will sell drugs, or prostitution [rather than take a job].

(Hispanic woman, Chicago)
Many participants emphasized the importance of the non-cash benefits that welfare recipients receive, notably Medicaid and child care assistance. Some even argued that the non-cash benefits were more important than the cash benefit.

Participants distinguished between essential and non-essential benefits by highlighting the importance of transitional medical and child care assistance to families leaving the welfare rolls and the problem posed when these transitional benefits end.

Well, I’ve always said that the most important part of public aid is the medical. That is, stamps and the rest are important too, but normally to me the most important part is medical aid that every child, every US citizen or every person who lives in the US has a right to. Because it is one of the, one of the most expensive services there are in this country. Therefore, we don’t all have the ability to pay from our pocket for a doctor’s appointment, for an operation, anything else that one may have be done. So I think that one of the most important ones is the medical, and is the one I would not agree that they take away entirely. (Hispanic woman, Chicago)

Sometimes some people find a job but without benefits, and do not have health insurance. She is worse off than the person who is on welfare. (Hispanic woman, Boston)

I don’t really think you really need the cash. At least if they give you your food stamps and your medical benefits. Because if you find an average job, it’s not gonna give you any kind of benefits like that. (African-American woman, Baltimore)
A majority of the participants favored “family cap” provisions that deny increases in cash assistance to mothers who have an additional child while already receiving welfare.

In almost every group, a majority favored family cap provisions. Mothers on welfare, they argued, should not expect the government to provide for additional children; they should be responsible enough to use birth control. Hispanic women were particularly adamant in their support for a family cap:

Moderator: What do you think about the change that says that women who have additional children will not get extra money? What do you think?

Everyone answering: They should not give them any more, they should not give them more! (Hispanic women, Boston)

Moderator: And about the changes whereby women will no longer get additional money for any new babies they may give birth to? Have you heard about those changes?

Several: Yes. I think it’s good.

A: Look, many times the government is completely right. I know a woman who started to have one, two, three, four, five. And as soon as one was born, she went to Public Aid; the next one was born, to Public Aid. She has eight children. (Hispanic women, Chicago)

Many African-American and white women also favored a family cap, but opinion was not unanimous. A group of African-American women in Chicago discussed the subject:

A: Why do the child, the child shouldn’t have to suffer for what the adult has did, you know. That’s making the child suffer. The child has nothing to do with this.

A: But this is the way, I guess, they going to make you go out and get a job.

A: It adds to the problem.... That means that if your child don’t have, you going to do everything possible legally, illegally, you know, to take care of that child.

C: Most people are not necessarily having no child just so they can get a check. They trying to have a child, they ain’t got nobody else. The need some company. They need somebody to love them and somebody to love.

A few participants ascribed other motives to the legislators who passed the family cap:

I think they trying to say, trying to tell us to stop having kids. (African-American woman, Boston)

One other thing is also that I think one must keep in mind that the laws are designed by güeros (the blond ones, Anglos), and for them it is good to have one or two [children] in the family, but for other cultures the more children you have, the richer you are, right? ... for us Latinos, for instance, to have a large family is not something bad, right? It’s wealth. They are punishing those who are not of the same güera culture, that’s blacks and us. (Hispanic man, Chicago)
Under the old welfare system, although many fathers provided no support for their children, some provided substantial informal assistance: diapers, clothes, a monthly cash payment. Under the new system, mothers are required to identify the fathers of their children in most cases, and fathers are required to acknowledge paternity, as a condition of receiving welfare benefits. Fathers are then required to make child support payments directly to a state agency. But in most states mothers receiving welfare are sent a maximum of $50 a month from the fathers’ payments; the state keeps the rest to defray the cost of welfare.

In other words, the new system, while recouping costs for the state, actually may reduce the direct contributions of fathers to their children’s well-being. It creates an incentive for mothers to conceal the identity of fathers, who may then make informal transfers of cash and goods (diapers, clothes) worth more than $50 a month directly to the mothers. Recipients criticized the new system as weakening the family:

Yeh, that’s crazy because for these fathers out here that’s trying to do something for their child, and in order for you to get public assistance to help you along with what the father is doing for you have to sign yes, that you’ll apply for child support. These fathers also doing what they supposed to do, so you gotta take them downtown and sign over custody, I mean that’s not... I mean that’s not right. (African-American woman, Baltimore)

It is almost like they are designed to crush a family, because if he wasn’t in the picture it would be like “oh, where is he?” we will help you with child support and we will make him pay child support and we will give you the food stamps, we will give you your little monthly insult as she called it, I mean but he is here with me now and he is helping to raise his daughter and he is paying to help his other daughter, why not give, like a crutch, that is all we wanted, just something until I got a job. (African-American woman, Boston)

An African-American mother in Baltimore said:

Right now, I am doing well, and I am working . . . but God forbid, if something does happen to me, I am going to find myself in a rough situation again, because they are going to go by my boyfriend’s gross [pay], and they are going to deny us [welfare] all over again. Who knows, we may be back on the street. So certain things do have to change to promote family sticking together because if I do fall on my face, I am going to have to leave my boyfriend just so that they will give me welfare. And then they will stick him with child support when there is nothing wrong with the relationship itself.

Still, the new system does create an incentive for mothers to leave the rolls because mothers not on welfare receive the full amount of support that fathers pay to the state, as some participants in a Boston focus group of white women were aware:

**Moderator:** What about child support? The payments from the fathers?

**A:** That stinks.

**Moderator:** Tell me about it.

**MR:** My kid’s father has it taken out every week. They take $60 out every week and I only get $50 a month.

**Moderator:** So you only get $50 a month?

**B:** What are they doing with the rest of the money?

**c:** When you go off of welfare you will get the $60 a week. That $60 will go directly to you.
The relationships between mothers on welfare and the fathers of their children were often characterized by a lack of trust. Both women and men were concerned that the new system, with its emphasis on work, would alter the power balance between women and men.

**Gender relations** Some women complained about male dependency and the lack of involvement of fathers in their children’s lives:

What they [mothers] are saying actually is they’re tired of taking care of these men out here that’s getting these babies. They should be able to take care of these babies that they’re getting. That’s what they’re really saying. *(African-American woman, Chicago)*

In contrast, some men felt pushed away by mothers who didn’t want them to continue to be involved in their children’s lives:

The deal with this is that many women, when they have them children, for whatever reason is, I don’t know whether it’s the labor pain, the nine months prior to the birth, but after that baby comes out, the father of that child becomes the most hated thing in her life. She can no longer stand him, he is regarded as the worst thing that ever happened to her. And some of us brothers, we can’t take that.... We want to be there, we try to be there, but them attitudes, post-pregnancy attitudes, they tend to push us away. And even those of us who try to fight through that and be there, we have feelings for them, and we love them, and we care about them. So through all the anger, we remain friends with them even though we no longer deal with them. It’s called I love you, I care about you, I just can’t be with you. *(African-American man, Baltimore)*

The very existence of welfare payments to mothers (and the vast majority of parents receiving welfare payments are mothers) and of child-support enforcement provides women with an alternative source of support that reduces men’s power over them, as these Hispanic men in Boston said:

A: I don’t agree with child support or with welfare or any of that because this is what the woman says to you, “Well, if you want, get out, because there is welfare.” For those reasons.

B: So it takes away your manhood, if she is getting welfare? [Laughter]

A: She says, “It supports me.” She feels bigger, more powerful, yes. Because of this, I wish it didn’t exist, “I’m going to welfare and it supports my children and I am going to get child support, so there!”

The availability of welfare benefits also reduces the motivation for men to responsibly support their children. Women expressed frustration at men who were not responsible fathers:

**Moderator:** What do you call welfare in Baltimore?

A: For me I call it like, for the deadbeat dads, the dads who are not doing their jobs. It’s like, to me, it looks like it’s helping them because they don’t have to, you know, go through what the mothers are going through. I think they should turn it around and let the fathers do everything that us mothers are doing. *(African-American woman, Baltimore)*
On the other hand, some men endorsed work requirements as a way to force mothers to be more self-reliant:

You know, kids grow up and they see their mothers on welfare and getting a check and stuff, and in some cases they may have problems in school or problems getting a job anyway so their excuse for being lazy is to get pregnant and go on welfare and just live on a fixed income. That stops growth. That stops self-respect and, you know, job productivity. (*African-American man, Baltimore*)

How else will time limits and work requirements change the relations between women and men in low-income neighborhoods? A group of African-American women in Chicago discussed what would happen in situations where women were dropped from the rolls, couldn’t find good jobs, and had to depend on men for support. They feared a power shift.

*Moderator:* But what about the partners in your life, how is that going to affect them?

*A:* Oh, Lord.

*B:* Argument every day.

*Moderator:* Wait a minute, you said arguing every day?

*B:* Argument every day. He don’t feel he got to get up and go to work, and he got to support everything. So, all the money that comes in the house, he is bringing in and he got to pay the bills and buy food.

*C:* Of course, he don’t like that. He know he going to have to do it regardless.

*B:* He going to have to do it, but it’s gong to be to a point where he’s going to be so stressed out about doing it and you and him is going to stay into it every day and it’s always going to be something.

*D:* He always will know he’s going to have to do, and some women just don’t like for just a man to do it all.

*A:* I like to have my own stuff.

*A:* Me, too. I ain't going to be sitting around waiting for no man to issue me out no money. Like I said, I don’t feel comfortable, you know what I’m saying, with anybody watching my kids. So, he ain’t going to be the only one working, you know, I’m going to do something. Where I’m going to work at they going to have a nursery or something because I got to have my own money.

*B:* Especially when you’re so used to doing stuff yourself and then everything get cut off and then that really make him think you need him, you know what I’m saying. That gives him control and power over you because he be like, well, I don’t know how you going to get such and such.

Others feared the potential for physical abuse when required work or schooling took them away from home, where boyfriends previously had access to them at any time:

*A:* All these women are gonna be going to school and whatever . . . where you been all day . . . I been at school. Don’t you dare put your hands on me, you know what I’m saying? Because they get angry. I used to get my butt whipped because I was at the library too long. They love to dog you because you home all day, but once you get out there and you do something, they got something for everything.

*B:* I was gonna say, like she says, you know, like when she went to school and took too long at the library and got slapped for it. That’s like me. I couldn’t go to school . . . he’d follow me to school. If I went to my mother’s house, he’d follow me to my mother’s, when I came home, he’d smell my clothes to see if I had another scent on me. (*African-American women in Baltimore*)
When asked about the likely impact of welfare reform, participants responded in both positive and negative terms. Although they predicted increased personal responsibility, they also predicted increased crime and family hardships.

**The impact of welfare reform**  
We asked the participants what impact welfare reform would have on them, their families, and their communities. Among their responses were the following excerpts.

**Increased personal responsibility:**

I don’t want my children to see me struggle. But if they see me, you know, going forward and doing for myself, they’ll do it for theirself. *(African-American woman, Baltimore)*

I think it’s a good thing for me ’cuz if they’re gonna keep on giving it to me I’m gonna keep on taking it. So I think I should just like look at it as a good thing where, get out and work. I mean, I’m able-bodied, I’m not disabled or anything, there’s nothing wrong with me, so I’ll get a job and go to college. *(white woman, Baltimore)*

I don’t know, but I know that people are going to become a little more responsible because they are going to realize that they are not going to have it [welfare] any more… maybe not all of them, but it is going to happen that many of them will come to their senses and say, “OK, I cannot count on welfare. I need to find another way to prepare myself and bring money into the house.” *(Hispanic man, Boston)*

**Greater family hardship:**

I think it’s going to affect my mother because I haven’t gotten myself together in the five years…. I mean she will have to go back on supporting me and my children so it will be more strain on her and her paycheck when I get cut off. *(African-American woman, Baltimore)*

I think you’re gonna see more families living together because they can’t afford to live by themselves. *(African-American woman, Baltimore)*

I think there’s gonna be a lot of abandoned babies ‘cuz it’s too much to have an abortion, welfare don’t pay for abortion, they won’t give you money for no kids, what do you do? *(African-American woman, Baltimore)*

Many of us will not have the money to take our children to the doctor when they get sick, without the [Medicaid] card or the money. *(Hispanic man, Chicago)*

**More crime:**

And I’ll tell you one thing, the crime rate’s gonna go up. *(African-American man, Baltimore)*

I’m going to be one of them that’s going to be on top of the crime rate because I’m not going to let mine be hungry. *(African-American woman, Chicago)*
When asked what advice they would give to the President and to state officials, participants asked for more time to make the transition, for more child care, educational, and training assistance, for continued medical coverage, and for help learning English.

Advice to lawmakers  
Finally, we asked the participants what advice they would give to lawmakers concerning welfare reform. As to what they might say to the President, a group of white women in Boston replied:

1. I would just tell him that we need, they need to find more day care for our children or after school programs if they want us to work so that our kids are safe and in a safe environment. That is how I see it.

1. I don't think there is enough jobs out there for all of us. I would ask him if he was going to find us a job.

1. I would tell him that we need more time.

1. I would ask the President what is going to happen to us. That we definitely need more time and how can I finish school if they are telling me to get off of welfare and get a job and do this. I am going to school to get a better job and to be better. I would ask why don’t they let people who are already there continue being where they are to finish what I am doing.

1. I would say to him that not everyone is the same. Everyone has a problem that is why they can’t do what they need to do like go out and get a job because they might have something like a learning disability or something that affects them.

1. I would tell him to go into our boat and see how he would be when we come to [how do I want to say it] step in our shoes and we will step in his shoes to see how he would manage.

1. I would tell him that he has to make sure that everybody has some kind of training program or something before they can just throw anybody off of welfare. They just can’t throw you off of welfare without no skills or anything like that.

Comments for the President from other focus groups included:

1. I would ask him to leave the health plan [in place when you go off the rolls]. (Hispanic woman in Boston)

1. I would tell him, um... just don’t cut aid off because it’s a lot of parents out here that really need it. That's the only way they living is off of aid. (African-American woman, Chicago)

1. And also include, and create some things for fathers, too, as far as jobs. (African-American man, Baltimore)

1. The first thing I would tell him, you know what? The biggest need I have is to learn the language, I’d like them to help with that. (Hispanic woman in Chicago)

To state lawmakers, the same group of white women in Boston said:

A: I feel like saying, what executive where sat down and said we are going to take however many people, I don’t know how many people in Massachusetts alone are on welfare, but who sat down and thought that we are going to kick them all off in the same month? Do you know what I mean, like everybody? How did they not think that there was going to be a war zone or whatever? They didn’t think about the outcome of it and how it would really impact.

B: Is this really going to happen or are they just threatening us?

C: No, it is going to happen.

A: What is going to happen? What is going to happen? I really want to know!
c: I think that what is going to happen is that they will have the two-year limit. The people will come to that point and they are going to say how stupid was this? They are going to have to reform the whole thing all over again and let everybody on and re-evaluate it on an almost individual basis. That is the only way that they are going to be able to deal with it because society can’t handle so many people just saying that they don’t have a job and they don’t know what to do.

Train people before they hit the time limit, a woman in the same group suggested:

Make sure that they put you into something that is going train you and to put you someplace. Make sure that they are going to get you ready to do something, some way, some how. That is going to keep you comfortable. That is going to support your household, your food, your necessities.

An African-American woman in Boston suggested more family-oriented programs:

I am not sure what I would say. Number one I think that they need more family-oriented programs that are not geared just for—it needs to involve the whole family... mother, father, and child. That way it gives the male a chance to understand what is going on with the welfare system ... the consequences and whatever and everybody has a chance to evaluate that whole program together and make it as a family.
Overall, the welfare-dependent and working-poor individuals in the 15 focus group interviews seem to understand and acknowledge the dependency that time-unlimited welfare can produce, to be willing and even eager to move from welfare to work, but to be anxious about whether they and their friends and relatives can successfully make the transition. They support the idea of time limits and work requirements but oppose one-size-fits-all restrictions that ignore constraints such as young children, ill children, the English language difficulties of many Hispanics, lack of education and skills, and prolonged welfare dependency. They urged that welfare agencies act to train and educate them so that they can obtain jobs after they stop receiving benefits. Some suggested that the loss of medical benefits would be more troublesome for them than even the loss of cash assistance.

The focus group participants were grateful for the assistance they received, but they viewed welfare as undermining families more than supporting them. To be sure, it is old news that a system which pays benefits mainly to single-parent families can weaken the bonds between mothers and fathers. However, the focus group participants also charge that the child support enforcement system may paradoxically undermine ties between fathers and mothers. Designed primarily to offset the costs to government of providing welfare benefits, child support enforcement requires that fathers make substantial payments, not to mothers and children but rather to government agencies. Under the new law, states do not have to pass any of that money to mothers and children who are receiving welfare; many states are continuing the old practice of passing through $50 per month. Focus group participants argue that child support enforcement often reduces the amount of assistance they receive from the fathers of their children, who no longer provide informal payments and purchases of diapers or clothes.

In fact, the interviews reveal substantial tensions between women and men. Welfare, by providing women with an alternative source of income, increases their autonomy and bargaining power in relationships. Now, some women fear that the end of welfare payments could leave them without an independent source of income and decrease their power and control. In addition, the old welfare system, which allowed most recipients to stay home, also gave boyfriends access to them at any time. Some recipients expressed concern that jobs would reduce their availability and lead boyfriends to abuse them verbally and physically in retaliation.

This report provides some of the first information on the reactions of Hispanics to the changes in the welfare system. In general, Hispanic participants displayed a more traditional perspective than did African Americans or whites. They were the strongest supporters of measures that deny additional support to mothers who have more children while on the rolls, and many were against abortion. They had the most negative attitudes about welfare. (“Thank God, I never received welfare, thank God,” said a Hispanic woman in Boston. “We, thank God, do not receive welfare because I work and we are in control,” said a Hispanic man in Boston.)
Many Hispanics were angry at the restrictions on assistance to immigrants. One participant suggested the legal immigrants were being made to suffer the consequences of a failed immigration policy that has been unable to stem the tide of illegal immigrants. Some of the Hispanic participants were in the country without documentation but were receiving welfare payments on behalf of children who were born in the United States. They were scared of taking jobs because if they were caught by immigration agents they could be deported and separated from their children.

On balance, however, the tone of the focus group interviews is cautious optimism—surprisingly so, given that welfare recipients face the threat of time limits and sanctions. Although many participants were concerned that they would not be able to move into the work world, they seemed willing to try if government agencies would provide them with what they viewed as necessary assistance. The remarks of an African-American man in Boston reflected this willingness to give welfare reform a try:

It probably will be bettering us.... It is making people get into the work force. It is making people get off it so that more people are getting off of it, it is probably still there for people who need it and can get on it and so that is good. Then the people that are getting off it and are getting their training and volunteering and getting jobs, it is helping them. It is not just helping them with money to take care of their kids, but it is helping their self-esteem and helping their character. Like everybody said, a lot of people that is on it, everybody that is on it don’t really want to be on it and it makes you—you know how people look down on you if you are on welfare. Sometimes when you are on welfare it makes you feel down and out too. So if you are getting off of it and are able to get a job and work, you feel better. Your self-esteem and your family and so it is helping everything and all of us in a lot of ways. We are all bettering ourselves.

Whether this cautious optimism will be borne out by the future course of welfare reform is one of the key questions our research group will be studying over the next several years.
### Table 1. List of Focus Group Interviews

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<th>City</th>
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