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At Issue: Shaping the Debate on Welfare

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV

This is the first of an occasional series of reading lists tied to issues in the news.

THIS LIST demonstrates, once again, that ideas have consequences. All the main elements of the new welfare law -- requiring work for benefits, time-limiting benefits, discouraging unwed parenthood and devolving power and responsibility back to the states -- have their roots in an unfolding intellectual and political debate that has lasted more than 30 years.

Here are 16 books that have helped shape that debate and that will help you decide what to think about the new law -- and what it may or may not accomplish.

Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men, by Elliott Liebow (Little, Brown, 1967). A richly textured description of life among inner-city poor blacks in the early 1960s, told from the vantage point of a group of often-unemployed black men who hung around a street corner in Washington, D.C.

StreetWise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community, by Elijah Anderson (University of Chicago Press, 1990). Twenty-three years after the men gathered at Tally's Corner, an unflinching depiction of male behaviors in neighborhoods now racked by drugs, crime, violence and a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America, by Alex Kotlowitz (Doubleday, 1991). Life in a Chicago public housing project as seen by the children: unemployment and idleness among adults, the almost complete absence of governmental authority, indiscriminate and often senseless violence (and death) and a pervasive resignation that things won't get better -- no matter how hard a person strives.

Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America, by Leon Dash (Basic Books, forthcoming). The excruciating realities of one welfare mother's journey through teen pregnancy, drug abuse, crime and death from AIDS. Based on Dash's Pulitzer Prize-winning series for The Washington Post.

Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980, by Charles Murray (Basic Books, 1984). A fusillade against the Great Society, arguing that it not only failed to help the poor but often made

things worse.

Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship, by Lawrence M. Mead (Free Press, 1986). Mead concludes that the problem is the permissiveness of the welfare state, not its size. Welfare recipients, for example, should be required to work in return for their benefits.

The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy, by William Julius Wilson (University of Chicago, 1987). Argues that the underclass was not created by welfare but by the decline in well-paying, blue-collar jobs.

Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform, by Mary Jo Bane and David T. Ellwood (Harvard, 1994). An easily read volume by two senior Clinton advisers that contains the single best summary of the key empirical research on welfare dependency, much of it their own.

The Work Alternative: Welfare Reform and the Realities of the Job Market, edited by Demetra Smith Nightingale and Robert H. Haveman (Urban Institute Press, 1995). A group of welfare experts (mostly liberals) study Clinton's original welfare plan -- based on subsidizing entry into the labor force -- and conclude that it wouldn't work.

The Tragedy of American Compassion, by Marvin Olasky (Regnery Gateway, 1992). A brilliant recounting of non-governmental charity to the poor, from colonial times to the present.

The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Welfare, by Michael B. Katz (Pantheon, 1989). In a nation as rich as the U.S., poverty exists because of a political decision not to redistribute more wealth to the less fortunate.

Tyranny of Kindness: Dismantling the Welfare System to End Poverty in America, by Theresa Funicello (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993). A former recipient's angry complaint that the anti-poverty industry is run for the benefit of its middle-class professionals, not the single mothers struggling to get by on paltry welfare payments.

The Forgotten Americans: Thirty Million Working Poor in the Land of Opportunity, by John E. Schwartz and Thomas J. Volgy (Norton, 1992). The attention lavished on welfare recipients obscures the high levels of material hardship suffered by the working poor, who struggle to make ends meet with little or no governmental assistance.

Reviving the American Dream: The Economy, the States and the Federal Government, by Alice M. Rivlin (Brookings, 1992). A prominent Democrat's argument for devolution and block grants made before she became Bill Clinton's budget director.

The Homeless, by Christopher Jencks (Harvard, 1994). A gem of a study that dissects what is known about homelessness, its causes and its remedies.

The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators, by William J. Bennett (Touchstone, 1994). Better to call this the index of depressing cultural indicators because it documents a decline of dispiriting proportions -- involving crime, family breakdown, teen pregnancy, education and popular culture.

Overview of Entitlement Programs (the Green Book), by the House Ways and Means Committee (Government Printing Office, 1993). Since 1980, the government publication with the definitive summary of federal welfare programs: 1,299 mind-numbing pages of program descriptions and statistics. Available on the Worldwide Web at <http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/GB/gbpage.htm>.

Douglas J. Besharov is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and a visiting professor at the University of Maryland.