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Welfare: An Albatross for Young Mothers

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV

The chances that the president and the Republican Congress will agree on a welfare reform bill grow dimmer each day, but the often heated political debate has obscured a remarkable shift in its content. Gone is a single-minded focus on job training programs and, in its place, has come a much heavier emphasis on mandatory work and other efforts to get recipients into actual jobs.

Some attribute this change to growing voter hostility to welfare programs and the pressure to cut federal spending generally. But there is more to it than that. Important new studies have undermined the faith that welfare experts -- on the left as well as the right -- have had in traditional job training programs. Older research indicates that job training works for some more-motivated mothers -- usually older, divorced women with work experience. But more recent research suggests that it does not help those at the heart of the dependency problem -- young, unwed mothers.

Beginning in the late 1980s, three large-scale demonstration projects designed to help these most disadvantaged parents were launched. Although the projects had somewhat different approaches, they all sought to foster self-sufficiency through a roughly similar combination of education, job training, counseling, health-related services, and, in two of the three, family planning.

-- New Chance was aimed at young recipients (ages 16 to 22) in 16 sites across the country who had their first child as teenagers and were also high school dropouts. The program attempted to remedy the mothers' severe educational deficits, primarily through the provision of a Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) and by building specific job-related skills.

-- The Teen Parent Demonstration required all first-time teen mothers in Camden and Newark, N.J., and the South Side of Chicago to participate in specified education and training programs when they first applied for welfare. Participation was enforced by reducing a mother's welfare grant for nonattendance.

-- The Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP), still operating, seeks to break patterns of intergenerational poverty by providing an enriched developmental experience for children (from birth to age five) and educational services for their parents. The majority of participating families are headed by single mothers.

These three projects represent a major effort to break the cycle of poverty and to reduce welfare dependency. The Teen Parent Demonstration, involving 2,700 families at three sites, was the least expensive at \$1,400 per participant per year. The most expensive is the CCDP, which serves 2,200 families at 24 sites for \$10,000 per family per year. These costs are in addition to the standard welfare package, which averages about \$8,300 per year for Aid to Families With Dependent Children, food stamps, and so forth.

All three projects served populations predominantly composed of teen mothers and those who had been teens when they first gave birth. A majority grew up in families that had spent some time on AFDC. Unfortunately, despite the effort expended, none of the demonstrations came anywhere near achieving their goals. In all three, the families in the control groups (which received no special services but often did receive services outside of the demonstrations) were doing about as well, and sometimes better, than those in the programs.

Only the Teen Parent Demonstration program saw any gains in employment. Its mothers were 12% more likely to be employed sometime during the two years after the program began and, as a result, averaged \$23 per month more in income. In most cases, however, employment did not permanently end their welfare dependency. Nearly one in three of those who left AFDC for work returned within six months, 44% within a year, and 65% within three years.

All three demonstrations were relatively successful in enrolling mothers in education programs. About three-quarters more New Chance participants received their GEDs than did their control group counterparts. But receiving a GED did not seem to raise a mother's employability -- or functional literacy. Jean Layzer, senior associate at Abt Associates, which evaluated the CCDP, explains that, rather than honing reading, writing and math skills, GED classes tend to focus on test-taking: "They think that their goal is the GED because they think it will get them a job. But it won't -- it won't give them the skills to read an ad in the newspaper."

Results were disappointing on other dimensions as well. Despite free family planning classes (mandatory in the Teen Parent Demonstration), rates of subsequent births were unaffected -- almost 30% of all the mothers had another child within two years. Moreover, mental health services had no measurable impact on the high levels of clinical depression among the mothers. And remedial efforts specifically targeted at the children did not improve their physical health, cognitive development, or social-emotional development.

All in all, a sad story. But what is most discouraging about these results is that the projects, particularly New Chance and the CCDP, enjoyed extremely high levels of funding and yet still seemed unable to improve the lives of these disadvantaged families. For these mothers, voluntary education and job training programs may simply be the wrong strategy.

The lesson from this new research is not that voluntary educational and job training programs should be abandoned. They seem to help welfare mothers (often older and divorced) who are ready to improve their lives. But, by themselves, they seem unable to motivate the majority of young, unwed mothers to overcome their distressingly dysfunctional situations.

This should not be surprising. After all, besides living in deeply impoverished neighborhoods with few social (or familial) supports, many of these mothers suffer severe educational deficits and are beset by multiple personal problems, from high levels of clinical depression to alcohol and drug abuse.

More mandatory approaches are needed for this group, an increasing number of experts (as well as voters) have come to believe. And that, more than budget concerns, is why the Republican bill -- and Bill Clinton's ill-fated 1994 bill -- contain mandatory work rules, backed up with the specter of terminated benefits. It's called being mugged by reality.

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