

February 28, 1996

Work, Not Job Training

By Douglas J. Besharov

The disappointing results of three demonstration projects designed to help unwed teenage mothers live self-sufficient lives show the limits of voluntary educational and job training programs. That is the reason an increasing number of social experts, legislators, and voters have come to believe in mandatory work rules and the specter of terminated benefits for certain welfare recipients.

The chances that President Clinton and the Republican Congress will agree on a welfare reform bill grow dimmer each day, but the oftentimes 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 blame this change on growing voter hostility to welfare programs and the pressure to cut federal spending generally. But there is more to it than that. Important new research has undermined the faith that welfare experts—on the Left as well as on the Right—have had in traditional job training programs.

As far back as the early 1960s, welfare reform and job training were synonymous. Given the American belief in education as the great social equalizer, it is entirely understandable that job training programs have been seen as the route off welfare. Moreover, evaluations conducted in the early 1980s showed them to be a modestly cost-effective means of reducing rolls. Thus, the 1988 welfare reform act, signed by Ronald Reagan, earmarked about \$1 billion a year to expand job training programs for recipients. Similarly, during his presidential campaign, Bill Clinton promised to provide welfare recipients “with the education, job training, job placement assistance, and child care they need for two years—so that they can break the cycle of dependency.”

But all this was before the debate about welfare reform finally focused on the role that unwed teen parenthood plays in establishing patterns of long-term dependency. For, although past research suggests that job training works for some more motivated mothers—usually older, divorced women with work experience—recent research

suggests that it does not help those at the heart of the dependency problem—young, unwed mothers.

Three Demonstrations

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 and job training, in addition to counseling, health-related services, and, in two of the three, family planning.

New Chance, designed and evaluated by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), was aimed at young recipients (ages sixteen to twenty-two) who had their first child as teenagers and were also high school dropouts. Its two-stage program attempted to remedy the mothers' severe educational deficits—primarily by providing a graduate equivalency degree (GED) and building specific job-related skills.

The Teen Parent Demonstration, evaluated by Mathematica Policy Research, required all first-time teen mothers in Camden and Newark, New Jersey, and the south side of Chicago, Illinois, to participate in specified education and training programs when they first applied for welfare. The project attempted to raise the earnings potential of teen mothers before patterns of dependency took root. 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. Although not a requirement, the majority of participating families are headed by single mothers. The program, evaluated by Abt Associates, also offers classes on parenting, reading and basic skills (including GED preparation), and other activities to promote self-sufficiency.

These three projects represent a major effort to break the cycle of poverty and to reduce welfare dependency. *New Chance* involved 1,500 families at sixteen sites and cost about \$5,100 per participant for the first stage, \$1,300 for the second, and \$2,500 for child care (for an eighteen-month total of about \$9,000 per participant). 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 twenty-four sites for \$10,000 per family per year. Since the project is intended to follow families for five years, the total cost is estimated at \$50,000 per family. These costs are in addition to the standard welfare package, which averages about \$8,300 per year for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), food stamps, and so forth.

All three projects served populations composed predominantly of teen mothers and those who had been teens when they first gave birth. A majority grew up in families that had received AFDC at some point in the past. Few had high school diplomas or GEDs, and many of those still in school (in the *Teen Parent Demonstration*) were behind by a grade.

In New Chance and the Teen Parent Demonstration, the average mother was reading at the eighth-grade level.

Disappointing Results

All three demonstrations were rigorously evaluated using random assignment to treatment and control groups. Unfortunately, despite the effort expended, none of the demonstrations came anywhere near achieving its goals. In all three, the families in the control groups (which received no special services but often did receive services outside the demonstrations) were doing about as well as, and sometimes better than, those in the programs: Participants were as likely to remain on welfare as those in the control groups.

Employment. Only the Teen Parent Demonstration program saw any gains in employment. Its mothers were 12 percent more likely to be employed sometime during the two years after the program began (48 percent of the treatment group versus 43 percent of the control group) 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 percent within a year, and 65 percent within three years.

The other programs did not show even this small gain. Fewer New Chance clients were employed during the evaluation period than controls (43 percent versus 45 percent), in part because they were in classes during some of the period. Those who did work tended to work for a short time, usually less than three months. Given the lower level of work, New Chance clients had earned 25 percent less than the control group at the time of the evaluation (\$1,366 versus \$1,708 a year). Only 29 percent of the CCDP mothers were working at the time of the two-year evaluation, the same proportion as the control group; there was no difference in the number of hours worked per week, the wages earned per week, or the number of months spent working.

Education and training. All three demonstrations were relatively successful in enrolling mothers in education programs. Teen Parent Demonstration mothers were over 40 percent more likely to be in school (41 percent versus 29 percent), and about one-third of the CCDP clients were working toward a degree, 78 percent more than the control group.

About three-quarters more New Chance participants received their GED than their control group counterparts (37 percent versus 21 percent). But receiving a GED did not seem to raise the mothers' employability—or functional literacy. The average reading level of the New Chance mothers remained unchanged (eighth grade) and was identical to that of the control group. This finding echoes those from evaluations of other programs with similar goals, including the Department of Education's Even Start program. Jean Layzer, senior associate at Abt Associates, concluded that rather than honing reading, writing, and math skills, GED classes tended to focus on test taking: "What people did was memorize what they needed to know for the GED. 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 percent of all the mothers had another child within two years. Moreover, mental health services had no measurable effect on the high levels of clinical depression among the mothers. And efforts specifically targeted on the children did not improve their physical health, cognitive development, or social and 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 generous funding and yet still seemed unable to improve the lives of these disadvantaged families. One would expect some signs of improvement in the treatment groups if the projects had at least been on the right track. But that's the point: for these mothers, voluntary educational and job training programs may be the wrong strategy.

Lessons

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 situations. But, by themselves, they seem unable to motivate the majority of young unwed mothers to overcome their distressingly dysfunctional situations.

This failure 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 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 the reason the Republican bill—and Bill Clinton's ill-fated 1994 bill—contains mandatory work rules, backed up with the specter of terminated benefits. It's called being mugged by reality.