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POVERTY -- United States
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SOCIAL services -- United States**Geographic Terms:****Lexile:** 1330**Full Text Word Count:** 1855**ISBN:** 9781429829748**Accession Number:** 43289752**Database:** Points of View Reference Center**Point: The Government Should Improve its Social Service Programs.****Thesis:** Poverty in the United States is increasing because government programs fail to adequately subsidize the poor.**Summary:** Poverty is defined as the inability of a person to afford to cover his or her basic needs, such as housing, food and health care. Poverty is not just a monetary problem, but a wide-ranging social issue that involves many factors, including inadequate education, healthcare, and self-esteem. In 2007, the US Census Bureau estimated that around 12.5 percent of the population lived in poverty. Industrial nations, including Italy, Japan, Canada, Germany, France, Sweden and Denmark, all have lower poverty rates than the US.

Even in the prosperous late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, government programs designed to help eradicate poverty, eliminate unemployment, and reduce welfare rolls have been unsuccessful. One such program is the Welfare to Work program, a piece of welfare reform legislation. The program encourages termination dates for welfare recipients to receive social services, and many states have set termination dates. The amount of time allowed for a person to receive welfare was reduced to anywhere from two to five years. Welfare to Work programs were funded to help those who have reached their termination date to find employment. However, these programs have not worked for the people they are supposed to help. Most participants are no better off financially as they were when living on welfare payments; others have fallen even deeper into poverty. Either way, the cycle of poverty, and the culture that perpetuates it, continues.

[Welfare to Work Programs Established](#)

During Ronald Reagan's presidency in the late twentieth century, those who were receiving welfare benefits in the US began to be characterized as lazy and accused of taking advantage of the federal and state welfare systems. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOAR) is a federal law passed by Congress in 1996 that ended some of the welfare benefits for which families had previously been eligible. By 2000, forty-eight states and

Washington DC had set time limits and a cutoff point for receiving social service assistance. The states were then mandated to design and operate so-called Welfare to Work programs using federal funding earmarked for the purpose of helping recipients find work. Ideally, people would be trained and would find work, thus being able to take care of themselves and their families while saving the government money. Yet the poverty rate in the US continues to be higher than other industrialized countries, even as these programs have been implemented on a state-by-state basis.

Results of Welfare to Work Programs

The results of Welfare to Work programs have indicated that it is not often enough to put a timetable on receiving welfare benefits. When benefit time runs out, a person with little education, few job skills, no support network among family and friends, and no self-esteem is unlikely to find steady work at a living wage. The training provider typically received 20 percent of a contract amount for getting welfare recipients signed up for its Welfare to Work program, and another 20 percent for designing a thirty-day training program. If a participant were placed in a job, there would be another 30 percent payment to the service provider. However, for forty-five, ninety, and 180 days on the job, the service provider has only been entitled to 10 percent of the contract amount. As a result, there has been less interest in the program succeeding beyond the signing up, thirty day training, and placement of people because, by that point, 70 percent of the contract amount would have already been obtained.

Even a well-designed program, when not well-executed, leaves participants without the help and individualized services necessary for their success in the work place. Studies show that class sizes were often too large, with one instructor at times trying to manage a class size of fifty to sixty students. Classroom activities were lacking, too, and students were often given "busy work" of circling words in a word-search puzzle, or even simply using up time by playing cards and reading magazines in class.

In one New York State program, the instructor was hired and contracted to hold classes for groups of welfare recipients who were mandated by the law to find work. Often, these enrollees were required to shadow employees of a hospital, discount department store, or service industry before they were instructed in job readiness skills. Trainees came to the program, but were unable to function as an employer would like. Some were dressed inappropriately and did not behave in what would be considered a professional manner. Often they were distracted by domestic responsibilities and problems at home, including, but not limited to, a sick child, a father who hadn't shown up to take the kids to school, or an argument among family members the night before.

Low job skills and personal problems, coupled with poorly-designed and executed programs, create negative results. A starting class size of twelve students might end up with only one student barely completing the course. Yet, a luncheon to celebrate the "success" of the enrollee often concluded the programs, with social service administrators invited to the events, giving the incorrect impression of success.

Welfare Reform & Earning a Living Wage

Although former welfare recipients who reach their termination date have to rely on earnings rather than welfare benefits, their income from working rarely puts them above the poverty level. A 2004 study concluded that the federal poverty level was \$19,127 for a family of four, including two children. In 2009, the poverty level for a family of four is \$22,050. While most programs in the study increased reliance on earnings rather than welfare, participants' income did not increase. A few families were lifted above the poverty line, but two programs out of the eleven that were

studied actually pushed families deeper into poverty. This most likely occurred because the jobs that were obtained did not pay a living wage, or because the employees failed to keep the jobs at all.

Governments, both federal and state, want to reduce spending and thus, want to reduce the number of people on welfare. On the other hand, individuals need to earn a living wage to provide for their families. But a poorly designed or executed Welfare to Work program is costly, too. If termination dates for welfare recipients succeed in reducing costs for the government, but fail to provide the same people with assistance in obtaining and learning how to keep a job, there are no real, long-term savings. People will turn to the government for help in the form of food stamps, programs such as Medicaid, and heat and energy services to make up for lost wages when they are not working, or when they are not earning a living wage (enough to pay for necessities such as housing, food and transportation). If no assistance is available, some may even turn to illegal activities to make money.

Federal Welfare to Work program funding officially ended in 2004, but states continue to offer such programs in a variety of formats. People in most states must now meet a minimum of work or training requirements to receive welfare benefits. Many have a termination date of two to five years from when they begin receiving welfare. Various programs are designed to give assistance to welfare recipients who must return to work, but many people do not know where to find them. These can be apprenticeship programs, or general government job resources. Other places that offer assistance include state unemployment offices and Social Security offices.

For people with limited abilities, finding work that supports them and their families can be exceptionally difficult. Studies have indicated that maintaining time limits for receiving welfare benefits does not significantly increase employment for people. Few people drop out of the welfare system before their time is up and find meaningful employment, and many recipients find that their income is reduced significantly when the time limit forces them off the welfare rolls. Without adequate social service programs, the US will continue to experience a high poverty rate. The US, like other industrial nations, should increase, not cut back on its spending on social services. Well-designed and executed work training programs must be funded by the federal government to help people become more self-sufficient, and to help them out of poverty.

Ponder This

1. Does the author provide more facts or opinion to support the argument that Welfare to Work programs, as they have existed, do not work? Cite examples from the text.
2. What reasons does the author give for the failure of these programs?
3. Does the author present an effective solution for both the problem of poverty? If so, what is it?
4. Is there a definable culture of poverty? If so, what are its characteristics according to the author?

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