



Next up for welfare reform: Focus on fathers

Twenty years after sweeping changes to the welfare system, anti-poverty programs continue to ignore men

Evan Wilt

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WASHINGTON—Twenty years after the last major welfare reform, U.S. poverty rates have shown marginal improvement. But according to policy experts, future changes need a new target: men.

“We don’t believe there’s anybody in our caseload who has had an immaculate conception,” said Eloise Anderson, secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. “We really want to go after fathers.”

On Aug. 22, 1996, President Bill Clinton signed bipartisan legislation to reform the welfare system.

“Today, we are ending welfare as we know it,” he proclaimed.

The changes set new standards for personal accountability for welfare recipients, establishing work requirements in exchange for benefits. But current policies continue to encourage dependence on the system, and according to policy experts, future reforms need to stop treating the symptoms of poverty and attack its root cause: broken families.

Since the war on poverty began more than 50 years ago, single moms have been the crux of the welfare system. The U.S. spends nearly a trillion dollars each year on more than 120 anti-poverty programs, many of which sustain single-parent households. Women lead 80 percent of the 12 million single-parent households in the United States, and statistically these families are more likely to live in poverty.

The effect becomes cyclical. Women who grow up in low-income areas and get pregnant drop out of school to support their children. Many then become dependent on the welfare system

trying to survive because they lack marketable job skills and the time or resources to obtain them.

The 1996 welfare reforms focused on finding ways for single mothers to work. And they did. In the last 20 years, employment rates for non-married mothers rose by 15 percent.

But Anderson said in the social services world, men continue to be an untapped market.

“What we’ve found is that when we get guys jobs, many of them get married,” she said. “If we can get them employment, they can start to form families.”

Future welfare reforms need to focus on getting men employed but also on providing the same kind of support systems already offered to women, Anderson said.

But men who rely on the welfare system tend to fall into a negative cycle as well. Boys who grow up in single-parent households are more likely to drop out of school or turn to crime. Making an honest living becomes nearly impossible with a criminal record but no education.

Michael Tanner, a poverty and social welfare policy researcher at the Cato Institute, said reformers can’t deal with poverty in the United States without looking at the criminal justice system.

“The fact is, if you steal millions of young black men out of society because they are in jail, on probation, or have a criminal record, that makes it impossible for them to get a job—they are constantly harassed—you are not going to be able to reduce poverty,” Tanner said.

But reformers also face the problem of fewer men participating in the workforce.

Since the end of World War II, the number of prime-age males participating in the workforce has slowly declined. In the 1950s, nearly 98 percent of men aged 25-54 either had a job or actively pursued one. Today that number is down to 88 percent.

“We need men to reverse that trend,” said Michael Strain, the American Enterprise Institute’s director of economic policy studies. “This matters on a human level. People who are not working are more likely to be in prison and not meet their obligations to family.”

Strain said employment plays a key role for men to live a full and meaningful life because it confers social norms and human dignity. It also offers national economic benefits, considering America’s gross domestic product has always depended on adding to the number in the workforce.

Former Michigan Gov. John Engler, a Republican, was part of the group that helped put welfare reform on Clinton’s desk in 1996. He agreed that future changes need to focus on preparing low-income Americans for work. Many unfilled jobs don’t require expensive four-year degrees, he noted, suggesting reformers need to find ways to give vocational training to those below the poverty line.

“One of the big myths that’s been talked about in this country is that everybody has to go to college,” Engler said. “Everybody does not need to go to college. Everybody just needs a skill—they need to be able to do something.”