Social Justice and Welfare Reform: A Shift in Policy

Sabrina W. Tyuse

SUMMARY. For six decades welfare entitlements were designated for the aid of poor children and since 1950, their caretaker. The current TANF program, however, represents a fundamental shift from child-focused aid programs to caretaker-focused work obligations. What are the economic and social consequences of a time-limited governmental reordering of responsibility for vulnerable children? More importantly, what impacts will caretaker-centered requirements and untested time limits have on the life chances of disadvantaged children? This article assesses from a social justice perspective previous income maintenance welfare initiatives, reviews their intended and actual outcomes, and explores the expected growing economic and social isolation of welfare recipients with current TANF policies. Following this assessment, future government initiatives as well social justice-type strategies to address the economic and social isolation of welfare recipients are recommended.

KEYWORDS. Social Justice, TANF, AFDC, welfare reform, social policy

INTRODUCTION

Public assistance is presently, and always has been, a much-debated issue because of its inherent:

1. how to provide assistance to those in need without,
2. encouraging if not promoting dependence for its intended recipients while ensuring the material welfare of poor children.

This dilemma is the crux of much social welfare policy debate. The Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601, not unlike the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) law of 1935 or the welfare reforms of the 1960s and 1990s, was designed to provide temporary assistance to those in need, by ensuring that aid would not erode the work ethic, denying assistance to able-bodied, employable adults (Trattner, 1999). While much work has been done to measure the overall effectiveness of governmental aid programs (Blank, 1997; Danziger and Weinberg, 1994; Kenworthy, 1999), this paper adds a focus by assessing if these programs are socially just.

Van Soest (1995) defines social justice in terms of what a person owes society (legal), what people owe each other (commutative), and what society owes people (distributive). Other definitions of social justice are couched in egalitarian terms. Fiskin (1983), Flynn (1995) and Rawls (1971) define social justice in terms of each citizen having fair and equitable access to societal resources and opportunities. In Flynn and Rawls’ conceptualization, as well as for the present researcher, socially just welfare reform policy embodies having access to necessary goods, services, and opportunities for poor and/or oppressed groups in society. Social justice then for the poor could lead to their improved social and economic status or equality of life chances (Fiskin, 1983; Wilson, 1987).

Studies on social justice and welfare reform have tended to focus on either the disparities of wealth resulting from our current economic system, or on the need for human service workers to enter the political debate on issues of welfare reform (Seipel, 2000; Stoesz, 2000). Stoesz (2000) discusses income disparities and the importance of asset building as a way to escape poverty. Research noted the absence of social work professionals (Stoesz, 2000) in social welfare policy debates and concludes that, to garner better services for those in need, social workers, human service professionals, and even religious leaders must enter political discussions, advocating for social change (Jacobson, 2001) in the design of social welfare policy (Lens and Gibelman, 2000; Seipel, 2000; Stoesz, 2000). This analysis will review the current welfare reform initiative, TANF, as it relates to social justice strategies.

The American public was dissatisfied (Weaver, 2000) with the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) poverty program (Farkas, Johnson, Friedman, and Bers, 1996; Howard, 1992; Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995). This was because of the perception that it not only failed to lift welfare recipients out of poverty, but it also encouraged continued dependency (Murray, 1984) by not requiring recipients to work (Farkas, Johnson, Friedman, and Bers, 1996). The Clinton administration’s response to dissatisfaction with the AFDC program was to sign the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, which replaced AFDC with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Block Grant (TANF) program.

The TANF program created and defined new work requirements and time limits on the receipt of cash assistance, and the block grant provides states with a fixed amount of funds to assist needy families. The block grant differs
significantly from the previous open-ended entitlement program, which provided assistance to eligible public assistance applicants. Moreover, this legislation gives recipients up to two years to obtain employment and up to five years of lifetime eligibility for federally funded cash assistance. TANF emphasizes a "work-first" strategy, in which programs are to move participants into employment status as quickly as possible through job search and short-term basic and remedial education training.

TANF eliminated a long-term welfare safety net, which for over 60 years under AFDC has provided the assurance of financial and material assistance to those in need. In fact, replacing the need-based AFDC programs with the time-limited TANF program represents a radical shift of government responsibility for poor children. Is elimination of a safety net socially just when underlying structural and economic conditions for continuing need exist?

To place the policy reversal of government responsibility for poor children in historical perspective, the original child support welfare program, Mother’s Pension in the early twentieth century (1911–1935), was designed to provide financial support to poor mothers, usually poor widowed mothers, to allow them to remain at home to care for their children (Howard, 1992; Skocpol, 1992; Trattner, 1999). In 1935, ADC program benefits were federally supported for the aid of poor children. A caretaker grant was not added to the ADC program until the 1950s. The 1996 TANF policy represents a significant policy switch from child-focused entitlement aid programs to a time limited caretaker-focused work requirement.

What will be the economic and social consequences of the governmental abdication of continuing responsibility to poor children? More importantly, what impacts will caretaker-centered work requirements and strict time limits have on the life chances of disadvantaged children? This article assesses the social justice aspects of previous welfare initiatives, reviews their intended and actual outcomes, and explores what can be expected with current TANF policies. Specifically, it asks whether TANF policies, or societal mechanisms currently in place, will enable poor children to access basic maintenance resources and educational opportunities that can, over time, result in financial self-sufficiency?

**Historical Background**

From an historical perspective, it is important to note that both former and current welfare programs were not designed to end poverty, or even to address the underlying causes of poverty. The original policy intent of ADC was to “prevent destitution” or extreme poverty (Trattner, 1999). The Social Security Act of 1935 was a multifaceted set of social policies aimed to address massive structural and economic problems brought about by the Great Depression.

The Social Security Act of 1935 was designed to provide immediate but temporary financial relief to destitute Americans and to create jobs for the unemployed. The Act’s three-pronged approach was targeted to provide:

1. aid to the elderly in the form of Old Age Assistance;
2. jobs for the unemployed in the form of work relief and unemployment insurance; and
3. assistance to widowed mothers and children through Aid to Dependent Children (ADC).

Initially, due to regional economic (Gordon, 1994; Piven and Cloward, 1997) and racial differences, most African Americans were not eligible for Social Security Act benefits. Powerful southern democrats argued, persuasively, that liberal social security benefits would undermine the work ethic of tenant farmers (Gordon, 1994; Piven and Cloward, 1997). The Social Security Act of 1935 excluded agricultural and domestic workers. African Americans comprised 50% to 60%, respectively, of these workers (U.S. Census Bureau, 1949). In 1950, Congress passed legislation (P.L. 81–734) by expanding the Social Security Act to include many excluded groups including agricultural and domestic workers.

Soon after the implementation of the Social Security Act, the United States entered into World War II. Because of defense industry labor needs during the war, women and minorities received unprecedented employment opportunities to fill skilled and semiskilled professions reserved for white males (Axinn and Stern, 2001; Day, 2000). Prior to the war, 40% of African American women and 25% of white women were in the labor force (Day, 2000), with an additional 44% of African American men being employed (Axinn and Stern, 2001). During the war however, 37% of all women found employment (Day, 2000). Nine of ten working age males, both white and African American were employed during World War II (Jaynes and Williams, 1989).

After the war, returning veterans displaced most employed women (Axinn and Stern, 2001; Axinn and Levin, 1982). Because of their wartime service and the need to support their families, returning veterans deserved to get
either their old jobs back or new positions. Moreover, it was argued, women (and married women in particular) who were in those jobs should “step aside” and return home for traditional work to care for their families (Day, 2000).

African American males also experienced post-war employment reversals. Some African American males retained employment in the automobile industry (Georgakas and Surkin, 1998) and in the public sector (Day, 2000). Overall, however, African American unemployment rates increased steadily following the war. The African American unemployment rate rose by 53% to 5.9% in 1948 and to 9.0% in 1950 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1960).

Returning veterans were eligible for federal funds for education, home loans, business and farm loans, unemployment insurance, and employment services through provisions of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Axinn and Stern, 2001; U.S. Congress, 1944), through the GI Bill. For white American veterans, access to education, a good job, and homeownership was underwritten by federal subsidies. For African American veterans, however, the future was not as fortunate. African American veterans, particularly southern African American veterans, did not take full advantage of GI benefits because of racial discrimination of GI benefit counselors (Onkst, 1998), who refused to grant them access to benefits to which all honorably discharged veterans were entitled (Onkst, 1998).

African American veterans employment experiences following WWII proved little changed from that preceding the war. Some showed declines. In southern states, technological advances in farming led to a 40% decrease in demand for laborers. As a result, between 1940 and 1970, four million African Americans, many to find support for their families, migrated from southern rural areas to large northern cities, including Detroit, Chicago and St. Louis (Lemann, 1992). Like European immigrants before them, African American migrants from southern states following WWII were mostly uneducated, illiterate, unskilled, and penniless. Unlike at the turn of the century, when settlement house workers, located in large cities like Chicago, Baltimore, and New York, addressed the adjustment needs of European immigrants, migrating African American families received little adjustment assistance (Trattner, 1999). While settlement house services could not be expected to alleviate the structural causes of poverty, services were designed to help socialize the immigrant families to their new environment (Segal and Brzuzy, 1998). With few exceptions African American migrants were largely ignored (Trattner, 1999) until the early 1960s (Trattner, 1999; Wilson, 1987).

African American families in northern cities generally lived in poverty. In fact, throughout the 1950s, more than 50% of African American families lived below the poverty line (Jaynes and Williams, 1989). In 1959, 18% of white families lived in poverty compared to 55% of African American families (Current Populations Report [CPS], 1991). By the early 1960s, the poverty rate for single female heads of households was more startling, with 40% of white households and 71% of African American households headed by women living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). This extreme level of financial deficiency eventually overwhelmed public resources. The public assistance rolls in many northern cities doubled between 1960 and 1970, from 6 million to 12 million recipients (Trattner, 1999).

American families, however, were largely unaware of the magnitude of African American poverty until a series of books (Galbraith, 1958; Harrington, 1962) and a New Yorker magazine documentary (MacDonald, 1963) delineated the conditions of the poor in America’s affluent society. Fast on the heels of these reports came the “long hot summer” riots in Newark, Detroit, and Watts, joined by demonstrations in hundreds of African American communities (Trattner, 1999) across the country. Following the upheaval and civil protest, President Johnson convened a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, the Kerner Commission, to determine the underlying causes for violent outbreaks and to recommend ways to prevent occurrences in the future (Trattner, 1999).

After seven months of research and investigation, the Kerner Commission presented a searing report to the President and to the nation. The Commission placed the causes of the riots and unrest squarely at white racism, poverty, segregation, and high unemployment of African Americans (U.S. Kerner Commission, 1968). The Kerner Commission called for social change efforts that would enable the poor, and African American poor in particular, to escape poverty (Trattner, 1999). The Commission called for full societal participation for African Americans, which must be granted through open access to societal resources, particularly education and employment opportunities, to housing, and welfare benefits.

At the same time that the Kerner Commission was researching and reporting its findings, the economies of large inner cities were undergoing dramatic change. The manufacturing industry, a major employer of African American males, left central cities to relocate in the suburbs, in the South, and in Third World countries (Wilson, 1996, 1987). Between 1967 and 1987, the city of Detroit lost 51% of its manufacturing companies, a total of 108,000 employment
positions (Wilson, 1996). The number of African American males between the ages of 20 and 29 who were employed in the sector fell from three of every eight to one in five (Wilson, 1996).

In legislation (Economic Opportunity Act programs), ignoring the employment changes taking place in inner cities, Congress responded to African American unemployment and poverty over the next two decades by creating programs (Job Corps, Operation Head Start, Volunteers in Service to America, Upward Bound) that focused principally on individual deficits such as educational and work experience needs. AFDC was amended in the 1960s, providing expanded financial benefits, support services for families, financial benefits to two-parent family heads who had exhausted their unemployment benefits, and also a provision for rehabilitating public assistance recipients through training and employment programs. Legislation included the 1962 Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA), the Work Incentive Program of 1967, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) of 1973, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) of 1982, and the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program included in the Family Support Act of 1988. The JOBS programs was replaced by The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996; also replaced was the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

While it is virtually impossible to uncouple the separate and combined effects of governmental programs and the civil rights gains of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s to determine their economic impacts, the result was that from 13% to 26% of African American managed to escape poverty and enter the middle class (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1998; Jaynes and Williams, 1989). As noted earlier, although 55% of African American families lived in poverty in 1959, this number had declined to 32% by 1969 (Lemann, 1992), to 31% by 1972 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), to 26% by 1998, and to 23.1% in 1999 (Center on Budget Priorities, 2000). An impressive reduction in African American poverty had taken place, because African Americans were gaining access to expanded societal services and greater opportunities.

At least 25% of African Americans (Bane and Ellwood, 1986; Olson and Pavetti, 1996) were left behind and did not benefit from education, training programs, or civil rights opportunities. Trattner (1999) labeled this group the “underclass,” and Wilson (1987) called them the “truly disadvantaged.” These were the unemployed single males and welfare mothers cut off from mainstream society. They were concentrated in economically disadvantaged communities characterized by high rates of poverty and low rates of employment (Wilson, 1987). Depending on the individual state, Wilson’s “truly disadvantaged” were 23% to 60% of the welfare caseload (Bane and Ellwood, 1986; Olson and Pavetti, 1996), a striking challenge to social and economic justice.

**Today’s Underclass: The Truly Disadvantaged**

Those left behind and mired in poverty were most affected by a second shift to take place in the U.S. economy. Beginning in the 1980s and into the new millennium, the U.S. economy experienced a major shift from heavy manufacturing to a growing information and service economy. Job requirements of this shift affected inner cities disproportionately, resulting in poorer neighborhoods, troubled public schools, and fewer college-bound students (Wilson, 1996). The rising information and service economy required high levels of education and good communication skills. Left behind, particularly in poor, inner-city communities, were those on welfare who had lower levels of education coupled with little to no work experience (Holzer, 1996). States reported between 30% and 62% of welfare recipients possessed high school diplomas or General Education Development certificates (Harris, 1996, 1993).

Added to lower education attainment and lower level skills, the left behind lacked sufficient access to public modes of transportation (Kain, 1968; Stoll and Raphael, 2000; Wilson, 1987, 1996) and necessary information of job vacancies (Stoll and Raphael, 2000) to seek higher entry-level jobs in suburban areas (Kain, 1968; Stoll and Raphael, 2000; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Transportation and informational barriers, or spatial mismatch, as proposed by Kain (1968), refer to these combined effects of economic restructuring and residential segregation on access to employment for minorities living in central cities (Kain, 1968; Wilson, 1996, 1987). Minority females are the most severely affected this by spatial mismatch (Blank, 1997); economic restructuring has left minority women with the diminished employment opportunities also experienced by inner city men, and with a reduced supply of marriageable men (Wilson, 1987). Geographic location has limited employment prospects for poor, African American as well as Latina women (McLafferty and Preston, 1996).
Amidst unprecedented levels of employment in the 1990s initially continuing into the new century, poor single mothers find it difficult to escape poverty. As Table 1 aptly illustrates, while poverty levels fell sharply from 1973 through 1999, one quarter of white households and 41% of African American and Hispanic households headed by women continue to live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

A myth prevailing is that poor single mothers refuse work (Edin and Lien, 1997). The opposite is true. Researchers report welfare recipients have little trouble finding employment (Harris, 1996, 1993; Spalter-Roth, Burr, Hartmann, and Shaw, 1995), and most work intermittently throughout their adult lives (Edin and Lien, 1997; Olson and Pavetti, 1996). The chief problem for welfare recipients is keeping employment (Bane, 1997). Studies have found between 25% and 40% of welfare recipients lose their jobs within one year (Friedlander and Burtless, 1995; Hershey, 1997).

Reasons for job loss are related to: (1) personal and family problems, principally stable housing arrangements or substance abuse (Sisco and Pearson, 1994) and, importantly, (2) only low-wage employment is usually available for welfare recipients because of limited work experience and lower educational levels (Wilson, 1996, 1987). Jobs welfare recipients are capable of performing tend to be low-wage without benefits or are seasonal or part-time (Spalter-Roth et al., 1995), characterized by high turnover and layoffs (Edin and Lien, 1997). Most jobs, even full-time positions, for this population do not pay sufficient wages to raise them above the poverty line (Edin and Lien, 1997).

The TANF work-first policy requirement supports any job and, over time, results in needed work experience and in increased wage levels (Pavetti and Wemmerus, 1999). Labor market realities do not provide empirical support for the optimistic employment assumptions upon which work-first initiatives are based. The current work-first requirement is not designed to address systemic causes of poverty (Wilson, 1996, 1987) or structural barriers to living wage employment (Wilson, 1996, 1987) for leaving the welfare rolls. Not surprisingly, studies suggest that work-first participation results in short-term employment objectives (Bloom, 1997) while long-term employment continues to be an elusive goal for welfare recipients lacking marketable occupational training.

Is TANF a socially just policy response for those living in poverty-ridden neighborhoods characterized by poor educational opportunities and ever-decreasing employment prospects due to growing geographic isolation? Now is not the time to remove the basic welfare income support safety net when so much work still needs to be done to assist single-mother families, both in the short term with employment, and for the longer term with training, education, and access to opportunity.

Early TANF studies (Weaver, 2000; Blank and Haskins, 2001) report the program has shown some success in moving welfare recipients from welfare to work. For example, 60% (Sawhill, 2001) of former welfare recipients are now in the labor force. Whether this increase in work activity among welfare recipients is due to TANF program activities, a strong economy, recipient fear of “using up” their TANF eligibility, or some combination of all three is unclear. Will the “jobs” last? Will the jobs, over time, result in needed work experience and in increased wage levels (Pavetti and Wemmerus, 1999)? This is unclear, While recognizing that the TANF program has shown some success, the recommendations below are specifically targeted to address the growing economic and social isolation of welfare recipients but especially those who reside in larger inner city communities.

Discussion and Recommendations

Keeping in mind issues of need and dependency, as well as what constitutes socially just welfare reform policy, independent analyst (Seipel, 2000; Wilson, 1996, 1987) and government-sponsored officials (The Assembly Special Committee, 1992; Kerner Commission, 1968) have explored the underlying causes of poverty and have made similar recommendations:

1. increase employment opportunities for the poor;
2. increase educational opportunity and improve public education facilities;
3. reform the welfare system; and
4. increase the availability of low-income housing for the poor.

Wilson (1996, 1987) called for similar increase to societal resources for those trapped in poverty.

To achieve fundamental social justice, by lifting the “truly disadvantaged” out of poverty, requires more than removing the welfare safety net by creating a welfare program that limits eligible children and their caretakers to a five-year lifetime income benefits. The current TANF policy fails to provide programs or policy incentives to improve access to basic goods, services, or opportunities for poor and oppressed groups in society. Moreover, many
welfare recipients lack the necessary skills necessary to enter into or to successfully compete in the new technological service sector of the economy. The recommendations (Tyuse, 2000) below acknowledge the qualified success, to date, of the TANF program, but notes that it needs to go further by providing social justice-anchored strategies to improve the overall quality of job training to include public school education and private industry incentives needed to reduce long-term poverty. Because TANF represents a fundamental policy shift from child-focused aid programs to caretaker-focused work obligations, these recommendations are specifically targeted to address the growing economic and social isolation of all welfare recipients but especially those who reside in larger inner city communities. These measures represent social justice at work by improving access to basic goods, services, and opportunities for poor and/or oppressed groups, particularly poor families with children, in society.

**Job Training Recommendations**

1. Create federal job training programs designed to address the special needs of long-term welfare recipients (or those at risk, such as Wilson’s “underclass”) (Wilson, 1987), with basic skills that lead to GED completion.

2. Creation of federal job training programs designed to prepare qualified welfare recipients (i.e., those with at least a high school diploma) for jobs in the service sector. During the recent period of economic upswing, work-first training programs resulted in short-term employment with subsequent welfare reductions. Long-term employment and higher earnings increases continue to prove problematic for the untrained and the unskilled welfare recipients. Providing training for the new economy for this population is of utmost importance.

3. Enact job-training policies that link training completion to available employment opportunities, or a safety net until adequate employment is secured. Development of business partnerships should be encouraged through incentives. While such partnerships are difficult to develop and to maintain, local business input is essential for welfare recipients’ labor market success. Moreover, job placement after program completion should be a necessary component of any training sequence.

4. Enact policies to improve the quality of present schools and new schools in central and inner city communities by providing necessary resources and qualified teachers to address the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and neighborhoods (Wilson, 1996, 1987).

5. Develop more programs to create school-to-work transitions. Because the majority of students will not pursue post-secondary education, such programs are critical in public school systems in poor central and inner city communities. They should provide students with resume writing and interviewing skills, as well as training in appropriate attire and behavior needed in the work environment. In addition, students should be offered vocational courses and training in typing, auto repair, machine repair, computer and office machine skills, as well as linkages to nurse’s aide training and other entry-level training in demand in the local labor market (Wilson, 1996).

**Economic Development**

Current economic policies and job training efforts have failed to address the employment realities of large, poor, inner city communities. Following are key recommendations (Tyuse, 2000) for federal and local government initiatives:

1. Develop programs in local environments that will stimulate job growth to address issues of high unemployment or non-employment of large segments of disadvantaged communities.

2. Improve central city residents’ access to suburban job markets. For example, most communities do not have adequate public transportation linkages from the city to the suburban ring (Wilson, 1996).

3. Provide low interest loans for small business start-up endeavors by indigenous residents of disadvantaged communities.

Measures to alleviate employment isolation include the need for governments to encourage local development and new industry relocation to inner city communities. TANF represents a fundamental policy shift from child-focused aid programs to caretaker-focused work obligations. These recommendations address strategies designed to target long-term structural and economic deficiencies in communities in which welfare recipients tend to reside. These measures represent social justice at work by improving access to basic goods, services, and opportunities for poor and/or oppressed families and children in society.
REFERENCES


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TABLE 1

Families with Female Householder, No Husband Present—Below Poverty Level

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<tr>
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<td>27.2</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>19.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<td>57.0</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>41.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>55.1</td>
<td>50.6</td>
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