

9-21-2004

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Recommended Citation

Weinstein, Deborah (2004) "Interrupted Progress: Forty Years of Child Poverty," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol20/iss1/10>

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Interrupted Progress

Forty Years of Child Poverty

Deborah Weinstein

In the last forty years since the beginning of the war on poverty, the condition of poor children has improved and the percentage of children living in poverty has declined. Children and their families made the greatest gain when there was a good economy and an increase in government supports. But when such investments shrink, as they have in recent years, progress is impeded. Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) must be reauthorized by Congress. The legislation now under discussion does not encourage states to replicate programs that have increased work and family income and helped children.

On the day in 1967 when Senator Joseph Clark met Gloria, the 10-year-old Washington, D.C. resident hadn't had lunch. "But we have black-eyed peas for supper a lot." And not much else. The District of Columbia Head Start program gave physical exams to 4,200 children and found that 40 to 50 percent had low hemoglobin counts, a sign of an inadequate diet. When Senator Clark traveled to the Mississippi Delta with his colleague Robert Kennedy, they met visibly underweight children, some with the bloated stomachs and body sores characteristic of malnutrition. A doctor who worked for the World Health Organization told Senator Clark "What we have seen in Mississippi and places in the North is slow starvation."¹

Evidence of such hardship in a plentiful land had a few years before shocked the nation into beginning a war on poverty. Now, forty years after the onset of that war, it is important to ask how children have fared.

There is no question that poverty among children is less widespread today and that its impact is less severe. But after a promising start in the ten years after the war on poverty began, it is disappointing that child poverty did not continue to shrink in each succeeding decade. From 1964 to 1973, child poverty declined from 23 percent to 14.4 percent of American children, cutting the poverty rate by more than one-third. Over the next three decades, child

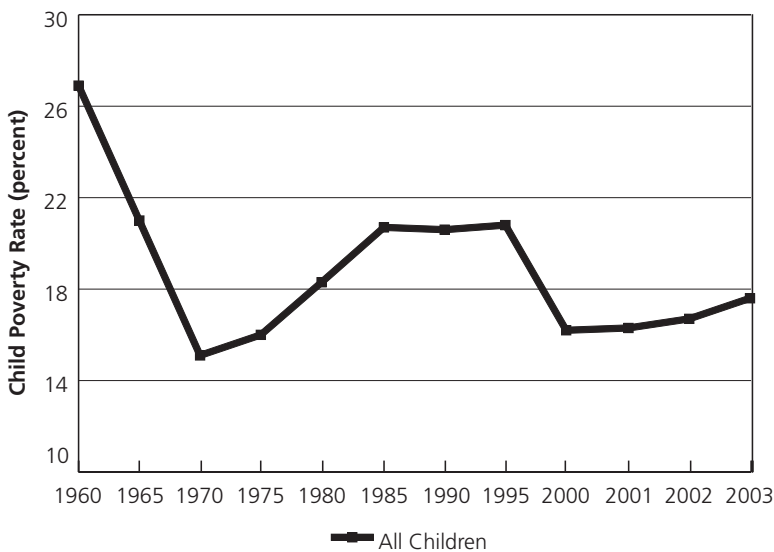
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poverty fluctuated but never again dipped as low as it was in 1973; in 2003, the proportion of poor children was up to 17.6 percent of all children.²

Children should have benefited more from America’s growing prosperity. Average U.S. family income rose from \$39,528 in 1967 to \$66,863 in 2001 (both in 2001 dollars)³ and the economy as a whole grew more than tenfold. A decade of skirmishes, if not all-out war against poverty, produced some results that appear to have been stymied over the next thirty years.

Figure 1

40 Years of U.S. Child Poverty: Some Progress; Not Enough



It is important to recognize the progress that has been made. Hunger is far less prevalent in the United States than it was when Senator Clark and Senator Kennedy were shocked into action, and even fewer people experience it regularly. Nevertheless, more than 18 percent of American children live in “food insecure” households — without “access to enough food at all times for active, healthy living,” according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Medical research has shown that children living in such households are more likely to have cognitive and health problems than are children in households that do not lack for food.⁴ Poverty continues to pose many risks for children.

Interrupted Progress What caused the decline in child poverty in the 1960s and 1970s? Why did progress slow afterwards? The experience of the past four decades suggests that children and their families make the greatest gains when a good economy and an increase in government supports reinforce each other. When the economy produces more jobs, children reap the benefits. But

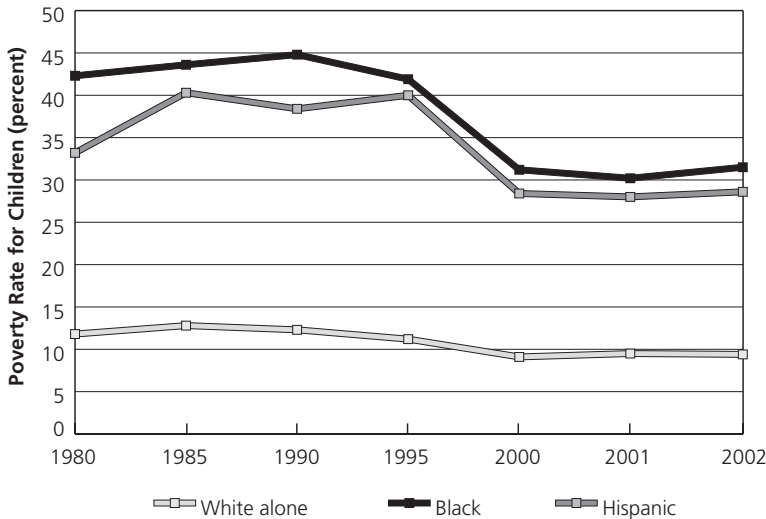
the boom time of the late 1990s proved that economic growth alone is not enough to cause the advances that poor children in America need and that we can afford. Government assistance is required to help families get and keep jobs and to augment low pay.

The Interplay of the Economy and Government Action Social welfare spending, in large part increased expenditures on cash and medical assistance, grew substantially in the war on poverty years, more than doubling as a share of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 1960 to 1974.⁵ The elderly were the major beneficiaries of increased government spending on Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicare. Government assistance lifted 57 percent of poor households headed by an elderly person out of poverty in 1971. Younger families benefited too: government help lifted 30 percent of families with younger heads out of poverty in that year.⁶

During the 1960s and much of the 1970s, strong economic growth worked together with government aid to reduce poverty. From 1967 to 1979, non-farm employment grew by an average 2.6 percent annually — no other period since 1947 had higher job growth. Poverty was cut almost in half for all Americans — from 22.4 percent in 1959 to 11.7 percent in 1979.⁷ Children were and remain disproportionately poor, but over the same 20 years, child poverty also dropped, from 27.3 percent to 16.4 percent.

Figure 2

Race Disparities in Child Poverty Persist



Black and Hispanic children have experienced shamefully high rates of poverty. In 1976, the earliest figures available by age and race, more than 40 percent of black children and more than 30 percent of Hispanic children were

poor, while just under 10 percent of white non-Hispanic children lived in poverty. In addition, families with children headed by single mothers experienced far more poverty than other family types. In 1959, nearly 60 percent of all single mother families were poor (as were 81.5 percent of “blacks and others” in single mother families). The beneficial combination of economic growth and increased government help greatly reduced poverty for these families too, and by 1979, poverty among female-headed families with children had dropped to 39.6 percent, and had declined to about half for black female-headed families.

The 1990s Boom Does Less for Poor Children and Families Prolonged economic growth in the second half of the 1990s did contribute to a reduction in child poverty and increased income for all Americans. But the progress did not match the success of the 1960s and 1970s, in large part because some of the gains made possible by job creation were undone by a decline in government help.

From 1995 to 2000, single mothers took advantage of the booming economy to pour into the labor force. Employment among single mothers rose from 61.7 percent to 73 percent over the five-year period.⁸ Before counting the value of tax and government assistance policies, single mothers’ aggregate income (largely from earnings) was enough to reduce poverty by 10.8 percentage points from 1995 to 2000. Unfortunately, single mother families lost government benefits in those years, taking away about one-third of the gains from increased earnings.⁹ In 2002, a little more than one-third of female-headed families with children were poor, only about 5 percentage points less than in 1979.

The 1996 Welfare Law Welfare payments were a smaller share of the single mother’s income in the latter half of the 1990s because of a major change in federal law. Poor families with children were no longer eligible for open-ended cash assistance. Now, time-limited benefits were provided in exchange for work or related activities. The new work requirements really did prod some parents who were receiving welfare benefits — now called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF — to seek employment. Unsurprisingly, mothers with more education and/or work experience, and who were not beset by health or other serious problems, were far more likely to find and keep jobs when they left TANF. The Urban Institute found that more than half of the families who left welfare and were not working (57 percent) faced more than one barrier to employment, such as poor physical or mental health, little education, or caring for an infant. In stark contrast, only 17 percent of parents who worked after leaving TANF had more than one such barrier.

Thus, some families left welfare because they were able to compete for employment and there were jobs available. Others left because they were unable to comply with the work requirements — physical or mental problems, either their own or their children’s, lack of education or facility with English, or care responsibilities for a very young child made it hard for them to put in

the required work hours while receiving TANF, and made it just as hard to find or keep a regular job after they left. Whatever the circumstances, departures from TANF and a smaller number of new entrants combined to cut the caseload in half from 1996 to 2001.

While low wages for working former TANF recipients meant that hardships were far too common for their families, things were considerably worse for families with neither work nor welfare. The Urban Institute's survey found that between 2000 and 2002, close to two-thirds of unemployed former TANF families reported that sometimes or often their food did not last, and they had no money to buy more (62.9 percent), compared with 43.4 percent for employed former recipients.¹⁰

“The Unprotected Recession” We have seen that low-income single mothers were less likely to receive government assistance in the late 1990s than in previous years, and that many were able to substitute employment for assistance. But the boom did not last forever. Starting in 2000, the employment gains of single mothers began to reverse. By 2003, employment among single mothers dipped to 69.8 percent. Twenty-eight percent of the job gains from 1995 to 2000 had been erased.¹¹

One would have expected TANF caseloads to start to rise to assist families that lost employment income. This has not happened; in fact, while caseloads have gone up in some states, nationwide, caseloads edged down another 3 percent from December 2002 to December 2003.¹² Declining employment has meant increasing numbers of families with neither welfare nor work. The Children's Defense Fund called this the “unprotected recession.” From 2000 to 2001, the first year of the economic downturn, there were 500,000 more poor children in female-headed households with no work and no cash assistance. The vast majority of these were extremely poor — living below half the poverty line (or less than \$7,064 for a family of three in 2001).¹³ There has been a long-term decline in the proportion of unemployed female-headed families receiving cash assistance, but the drop became more precipitous in the recent downturn. In 1975, 60 percent of unemployed women with children received cash assistance. In 2000, the proportion had been cut almost in half, to 32 percent. By 2002, only about one in five unemployed women and their children were helped by TANF. (See figure 3.)

What Would Help? The evidence from various welfare experiments in the United States shows that the best way to raise family incomes is to combine work with a package of government assistance. Some programs made a special effort to encourage parents to wait for a job with better pay, rather than taking the first job available. But in general, wages for former TANF recipients are low, and cash assistance is usually needed for parents to lift their children out of poverty. When welfare to work programs supplemented low wages with cash aid, child care, and medical assistance, parents worked more, family income was higher, and children did better in school and had fewer behavior

Figure 3*Vanishing Help for Families With No Welfare No Work*

Income Year	Total	No Work		No Work and no Welfare Income		
		Weekly Avg	% with Welfare	Number	% of All Families	% of No Work
1975	4,986	2,503	59	1,024	20.5	40.9
1976	5,164	2,607	60	1,053	20.4	40.4
1977	5,530	2,704	60	1,086	19.6	40.2
1978	5,617	2,599	62	994	17.7	38.3
1979	5,918	2,617	59	1,064	18.0	40.7
1980	6,299	2,849	60	1,143	18.1	40.1
1981	6,488	2,867	61	1,105	17.0	38.6
1982	6,397	3,027	61	1,195	18.7	39.5
1983	6,622	3,064	61	1,195	18.0	39.0
1984	6,832	3,070	62	1,153	16.9	37.5
1985	6,893	3,095	62	1,186	17.2	38.3
1986	7,094	3,142	62	1,189	16.8	37.8
1987	7,153	3,115	63	1,163	16.3	37.3
1987b	7,216	3,114	62	1,194	16.6	38.4
1988	7,363	3,126	62	1,188	16.1	38.0
1989	7,445	3,093	60	1,226	16.5	39.7
1990	7,707	3,258	64	1,159	15.0	35.6
1991	7,991	3,450	63	1,261	15.8	36.6
1992	8,230	3,516	62	1,328	16.1	37.8
1993	8,756	3,852	62	1,449	16.5	37.6
1994	8,665	3,559	60	1,412	16.3	39.7
1995	8,751	3,300	57	1,418	16.2	42.9
1996	8,957	3,336	53	1,575	17.6	47.2
1997	8,822	3,140	46	1,706	19.3	54.3
1998	8,928	2,935	40	1,748	19.6	59.6
1999	8,735	2,640	35	1,725	19.7	65.3
2000	8,509	2,381	32	1,614	19.0	67.8
2000S	8,812	2,540	31	1,759	20.0	69.2
2001	9,169	2,726	25	2,056	22.4	75.4
2002	9,410	2,924	22	2,277	24.2	77.9

or mental health problems. Programs with the premise that work should enable families to lift their children out of poverty, such as Milwaukee's New Hope Project and the early demonstration of the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), both increased work and reduced poverty.¹⁴

Rigorous evaluations of many program models found that simply increasing work among parents did not produce good outcomes for children. Only when incomes rose through a combination of work and cash aid did children do better. Gordon Berlin, Senior Vice President for Work, Community, and Economic Security at Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, a well-respected independent evaluator of welfare to work programs, testified to the U.S. Senate that "Welfare reform programs that led to increases in mother's employment and income — specifically, those that included earnings supplements — consistently improved the school performance of elementary school-age children."¹⁵

Will We Build on the Successful Approaches? Temporary Assistance for Needy Families must be reauthorized by Congress. The renewal of the law should be seized as an opportunity to encourage states to replicate the programs that have increased work and family income and helped children. So far, Congress has not availed itself of this opportunity. Instead, the House of Representatives has passed legislation at the Bush administration's bidding that requires a greater proportion of parents to engage in more hours of narrowly defined work as a condition of receiving benefits. There is no evidence from any of the welfare to work evaluations that more work while on welfare is related to success in finding a real job off welfare. Despite the evidence that child care assistance is an important support both for families seeking to leave TANF and for low-income families trying to stay at work, the House included only \$1 billion in new child care funding over five years — far too little to support its own increased work requirements and certainly inadequate to expand help to the millions of unserved families with incomes low enough to qualify. The House bill acknowledges that families with barriers to employment need help, but limits concentrated treatment for such problems to three months out of every two years, with additional care only possible alongside at least three full days of work — laughably unrelated to most professionals' assessment of what it takes to treat serious problems like disability or substance abuse. Such specific prescriptions to states about the appropriate number of months for services are quite contrary to the concept of state flexibility often praised by supporters of the 1996 law.

In addition, the Bush administration and the House prescribe marriage. Noting that single mothers are more than five times more likely to be poor than are married couples with children, the House bill's authors include \$300 million a year for marriage promotion activities — primarily education about the benefits of marriage and counseling for unmarried parents. Some of the funding is diverted from current bonuses to states with good track records

placing parents in better-paying jobs and helping them to stay at work. While it could be useful to evaluate the effectiveness of a variety of marriage promotion activities, it is worth noting that so far the program that has been most successful at encouraging marriage is the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). Compared with a control group, MFIP participants were more likely to marry or stay married. It is not unreasonable to suppose that reduced family stress because of higher income, health benefits, and more secure child care results in more stable families. The House bill excludes strategies to raise income from its marriage promotion activities.

Because significant numbers of Senators oppose the House approach, the legislation is stuck, and Congress has repeatedly had to extend current law unchanged. It would be most welcome if Congress could step back and recognize the lessons of the past forty years. Child poverty declined the most when economic growth was combined with income supports; when such investments shrink, further progress is impeded.

There are many ways to supplement income. The Earned Income Tax Credit provides more than \$30 billion a year to low- and moderate-income working families and in 1999 lifted 2.6 million children out of poverty. More income supports could be provided through the tax system. Continuing partial TANF benefits to working families is another successful approach. Helping families to collect more of the child support owed to them is yet another source of cash. Non-cash aid in the form of food stamps, child care, and housing assistance is a vital form of antipoverty support. Encouraging states to combine several of these strategies to supplement parents' earnings is the proper way to resume and complete the war on poverty.☘

Notes

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8. Arloc Sherman, Shawn Fremstad, and Sharon Parrott, "Employment Rates for Single Mothers Fell Substantially During Recent Period of Labor Market Weakness" (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 22, 2004), 2.
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10. Pam Loprest, "Disconnected Welfare Leavers Face Serious Risks" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, August 2003).
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What Kind of Labor Market Awaits Low-Income Workers?

Françoise Carré

This essay highlights changes in the context of the labor market for low-income people, particularly mothers. It briefly reviews labor market trends and policies. It then highlights the challenges faced by such workers. The essay argues for a shift in thinking and policy advocacy to encompass the world of work, and its domination by business imperatives and language, and thus better represent poor people's concerns in the policy world.

A set of stylized facts continues to drive the understanding of researchers and policy analysts regarding the situation of low-income people in the labor market. The low-income population has been described as being confined during their work careers to low-pay jobs, in low-pay occupations and/or industries, and with limited opportunities to overcome this confinement. This limitation is explained by structural barriers such as the job characteristics, lack of career ladders, spatial “mismatch” (geographic distance between poor neighborhoods and the location of entry-level jobs), racial/ethnic and gender discrimination in job access and promotion, as well as racial or gender segregation of jobs. In turn, these factors result in limited work experience and greater incidence of unemployment among low-income workers. The situation of low-income people in the labor market is also explained by poor people's low education level, whether because education translates into job skills rewarded by the market (human capital) or because education signals the ability to learn and perform a job (hard as well as soft skills) and serves as a means to sort workers in the job queue. Depending upon their school of thought, analysts give more or less weight to structural versus human capital characteristics.

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Recent Trends

Two broad trends have shaped the experience of low-income people in the labor market in recent years: the implementation of welfare reform and the transformation of entry-level jobs. The implementation of welfare reform at both federal and state levels has meant the end of entitlement to income support for poor mothers (occasionally fathers) and the new requirement to work or perform community service in exchange for receipt of income supports and other safety net benefits. Welfare reform has transformed the world of poor people, particularly of mothers with school-age children. Additionally, welfare reform has compelled poverty researchers and advocates to shift their focus from social policy (benefit provision) to employment-related policy. The liabilities and risks of welfare reform for individuals and families are well documented. From the policy analysis standpoint, rare benefits of this significant shift include the end of “conflict” between the needs and demands of low-wage workers as a group and those of welfare recipients. Benefits also include increasing visibility of the untenable situation of parents, mothers in particular, in low-income jobs that offer little or no flexibility to accommodate family and community responsibilities. The fact that mothers in full-time, low-wage jobs are unable to support themselves and their children may serve as a useful argument for the policy analyst who would change current policy.

Additionally, there have been significant changes in the labor market for all low-income workers, but for those exiting public assistance in particular, who now encounter a labor market whose structural changes have consequences that can be detrimental, a labor market that is riskier and potentially hurtful. First, there appears to have been more “labor market churning,” more job destruction and individual job changes in the past twenty years than in previous decades.¹ In and of itself, labor market churning could be neutral for low-income workers. But churning has been accompanied by the fairly steady decline of manufacturing jobs, historically the pathway to decent living standards for workers with high school or lower education levels.

Second, within firms, entry-level jobs are less likely than in the past to be connected to “career ladders” (identifiable paths of wage progression, skill training, and promotion). Increasingly, entry-level jobs are “externalized,” that is, subcontracted, or with hiring taking place through a third party (staffing company) or through an explicitly short-term employment arrangement.² This trend has particularly severe implications for low-income workers, those with limited education, and those with limited labor market experience.³ The ability to build earning power through work experience and seniority is no longer a straightforward matter. Evidence for these trends is indirect but also compelling. We see the growth of nonstandard work arrangements, for example.⁴ The services of the staffing industry are increasingly used to hire entry-level workers for extended probationary periods enabling companies to “screen” potential job candidates.

A third trend also has direct impact on low-income workers. Wage inequality has increased over the past twenty years across the overall wage structure, *between as well as within* most industry, occupation, and demographic groups.⁵ Wages at the high end of the distribution have increased significantly in real terms while those at the bottom and near bottom of the wage distribution have stagnated, even declined, in real terms. These trends do not bode well for workers entering, or re-entering, the labor market.

A fourth set of trends with consequences for all workers but particularly low-income workers is the rapid decline of health insurance coverage and the stagnant rate of pension coverage. For private sector workers in the lowest fifth of the wage distribution, health insurance coverage declined from 40.7 percent in 1979 to 33.4 percent in 2000.⁶ Also, the availability of employer-provided pensions to private sector low-wage workers, already low, has slightly declined. Eighteen percent of private sector workers in the lowest fifth of the wage distribution had employer-sponsored pension coverage in 2000 as compared to 19.5 percent in 1979.⁷ Thus, with welfare reform and cuts in other public income supports, mothers (and some fathers) are entering or re-entering the labor market at a time when the system of employer-based benefit provision is under pressure. Furthermore, available public subsidies for health care and child care are threatened because, even if funding is increased by the states, the need has increased.

While there is debate about what factors are most influential in worsening the position of low-income, particularly entry-level, workers, there is general agreement that economic pressures on employers have combined with changes in the institutional environment to worsen the relative position of these workers. Changes in the regulatory environment include a declining real value of the minimum wage, decline of union power, and deregulation of key industries. Also, innovations in information technology have been used to automate routine tasks.⁷ These trends have taken place against a backdrop of limited improvements (or decline) in schools in low-income areas as well as continued and growing disparities in resources among school districts.

Consequences

Thus, growing numbers of workers are re-entering the labor market, most likely at the bottom of the wage scale, at a time when entry-level jobs are of declining quality with stagnant or declining real wages, reduced attachment to career ladders, less generous employer-sponsored benefit provision, and so on. Also, as will be demonstrated by other essays in this volume, current policy, including the progressive phasing out of safety net benefits as earnings increase, diminishes the total income of workers who transition from public assistance. These trends demand new thinking. As the research, policy, and advocacy communities contend with the shifts in antipoverty policy, a significant shift in conceptual categories and policy analysis will also need to take

place. Historically, those concerned with social policy in general, and welfare policy in particular, have conceived of policy as seeking to lift “families” out of poverty. Welfare (AFDC/TANF), in particular, was income support for children and, accessorially, the parent raising them. (State general relief programs, however, did support lone adults.) Hence, the unit of analysis and advocacy has been the family, mainly its dependent members.

In the current situation, with its emphasis on time limits for income support, and work mandates, analysts and advocates have experienced a shift in the focus of policy debates. As in all transitions, however, there remain mismatches between thinking and reality, vocabulary and fact. In the social policy world, “work” (employment and work experience) has been primarily seen as a means to lift families out of poverty (which it no doubt should be). In the current situation, work and employment as well as policies to support employment, are still seen in this light primarily. A job helps the “family.” And the role of policy is to help “families” hold onto income generating jobs through the head of household. In the world of work, however, and in the eyes of employers in particular, a job is held by an individual, whose family, and community obligations and other personal commitments are irrelevant. Perhaps more than any industrialized country, the U.S. workplace is inured to the social context for people’s work and is least regulated by mandates for family leave, child care subsidies, and so on. Thus, poor people, many of whom are women with children, find themselves in jobs that are the least flexible and where they must contend with employers who do *not* see them as tending to a family.⁹

For policy analysts and advocates, the job of advocating for “employment supports” has become more complex. They must advocate for policy supports in a time of huge budget deficits and increased demands on diminishing public resources as well as for accommodation by employers and industry associations that are disinclined to see their employees as part of a family constellation and community network. In some states, innovative and committed welfare office and career center administrators have worked on “service integration,” facilitating concurrent access to employment services and social benefits (for example, EITC, subsidized childcare and other employment supports.)¹⁰ These efforts, though constructive and successful, go only part of the way toward addressing the challenges people face in low-wage jobs because they leave the structure of these jobs, personnel policies, and supervisors’ attitudes unchanged and unquestioned. Needless to say, this shift in thinking is required but not sufficient to achieve changes in universal policies that set the context for employment. These include defining and implementing universal access to a broad range of supports including child care, health insurance, retirement income, labor standards and workplace rights, affordable housing, and transportation, among others.☘

Notes

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In the late 1960s, I was hired as a counselor in New Careers, a program of the community action agency in Columbus, Ohio, that combined paid work experience with college courses at Ohio State. The idea was to enable low-income adults to enter careers in public service. Years later, in 1987, I was hired as the Executive Director of WCAC, the Worcester CAA. It was never my plan to come full circle and end my professional career where I started, in community action, but here I am.

Community Action is not so much about creating a safety net as it is about building ladders out of poverty. The safety net may offer temporary refuge but it is not a destination. Ladders that offer education, employment skills, family support, child care, home ownership assistance (to name a few) ensure self-sufficiency and address the long-term causes of poverty. Participants “climb” at their own pace and toward their own goals. At WCAC I’ve been privileged to see Head Start parents become teachers, Fuel Assistance clients become Energy staff, and GED graduates become college students and employees in the professional offices of the city. We succeed because of the efforts of our “customers” and because of collaboration with other community action agencies, with educational institutions, and with private and public partners.

When I accepted the position as Executive Director, I knew it would not be easy. I was right. But the benefits of leading an organization that assists residents build brighter futures more than compensates for the worries about budgets, personnel, and buildings. The dedicated staff, committed board members and volunteers, MASSCAP network, and local partners have made for a very rewarding career with a very important mission.

Patsy C. Lewis

Worcester Community Action Council, Inc.

