

Revisiting the Welfare to Work Framework for Research, Education, and Outreach

Welfare reform and the impact on families will be discussed during the 2002 Congressional Session. This paper offers a framework to guide the discussion. The researchers used data from the NC-223 Multi State Research Project "Rural Low-Income Families: Tracking their Well-Being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform" to illustrate the framework's family economic continuum using data on education, employment history, and occupation. The paper shares how low-income families in context of welfare reform are best viewed from an ecological perspective. Failure to recognize the ecological relations will handicap any decisions about policy, community supports, and/or families.

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Introduction

The purpose of the panel presentation was to share a framework for research, education, and outreach that can be used to analyze issues involved in welfare reform discussions. Presenters are members of the United States Department of Agriculture, Experiment Station North Central Multi-State Project, "Rural Low-Income Families: Tracking their Well-Being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform." Researchers involved in the project are from California, Colorado, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Wyoming. The project began in 1998 and continues until September 30, 2003.

Policy Context of Welfare Reform

Two major pieces of legislation drove the welfare reform discussions: Public Law 104-193, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), and Public Law 104-180, The Agricultural, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 1997 (Food Stamp legislation). The legislation governing Food Stamps appropriations is passed each year with the latest one being Public Law 106-387. Reauthorization of the PRWORA is scheduled to be discussed during 2001 (Session 107) and probably will be presented in 2002 when the appropriations are scheduled to end. Although there are other pieces of legislation that influence low-income families, the team is focusing on these pieces.

Objectives

The overall purpose of the research is to assess changes in the well-being and functioning of rural families in the context of policies that reform welfare. The specific objectives are to:

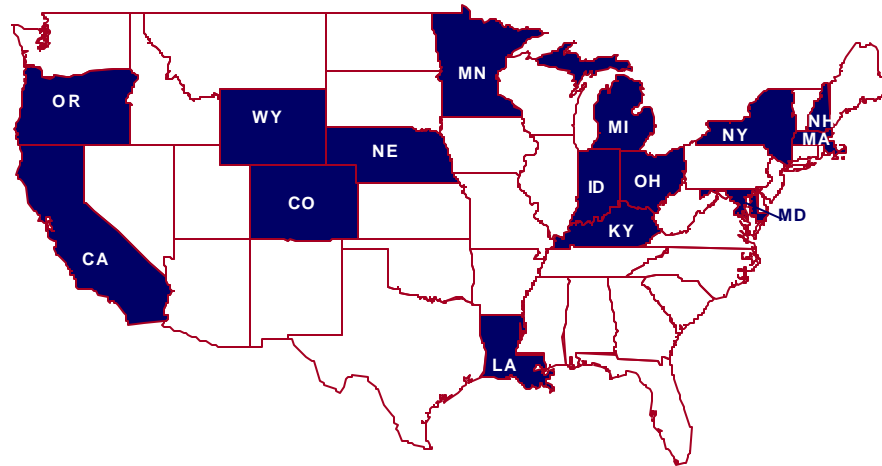
- * Track over time the individual and family circumstances, functioning, and well-being of rural, low-income families with children;
- * Track over time the changing welfare policy environment as well as the community factors that facilitate family support for rural low-income families with children; and
- * Analyze the interactions between welfare policy, community infrastructure, and individual and family circumstances, functioning, and well-being that affect the ability of rural, low-income families with children to function in a changed environment of policies and program.

Data Set

The database for this study is 410 families from wave 1 of a 15-state longitudinal study of low-income rural families. The study consists of mothers of multiple cultures ages 18 and older with at least one child 12 years old or younger. They are currently eligible for, or are receiving Food Stamps, or Women Infants and Children (WIC) Program transfers. In 1999-2000 the families were recruited through various methods designed to capture diversity

across the states. Persons working in programs that serve the eligible families (Food Stamps, WIC Program, Head Start, Work Centers, Social Service Offices, Vocational Technical Schools, child care centers for farm laborers, welfare to work classes, 4-H parents, Extension parenting classes, Housing Authority offices, food pantries, Latino Migrant and Settled Workers Program, homeless shelter, and Spanish Speaking Community Action Program) recruited participants. Data were collected using a qualitative-quantitative protocol for face-to-face interviews. By combining data across the states (4 Western, 5 Central, 2 Southern, and 4 Eastern), in 27 locations, social science researchers can identify common forces affecting many rural people and counties, in relation to welfare policies. (Figure 1).

Figure 1
States Participating in Study.



Several instruments are administered during the interviews: Feelings About How Things Are Going (Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale-CES-D in Radloff, 1977), Life Skills Assessment, Knowledge of Community Resources (Richards, Pamulapati, Corson, & Merrill, 2000), Adult Health Survey, Child Health Survey, and Food Security Module (18-item Core Food Security Module, USDA).

All family interview data are coded by one university team using agreed upon themes and rules. Qualitative interview data with mothers are transcribed verbatim and coded for thematic content using the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and qualitative analysis techniques (Berg, 1997; Gilgun, et al., 1992; Kvale, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The quantitative survey measures permit numeric picture of low-income rural families over time while the qualitative data give voice to the numbers.

Welfare Reform Framework

In 2000, Bauer, Braun and Olson developed a framework for understanding the comprehensiveness of welfare assistance policies that contribute to the well-being of individuals and families. Well-being is conceptualized in many different ways (Braun & Bauer, 1998a, 1998b). In this context, well-being is conceptualized as a continuum of personal or family conditions from crisis to thriving with at-risk and safe as intermediate points. In this article, the framework is a way of emphasizing family economic well-being. The crisis pole describes families unable to meet even the most basic of needs; whereas the opposite pole, thriving, represents those families that are meeting their needs and wants with current income, contributing to their well-being, and to the community. The two intermediate points between the poles help illustrate the fluidity of well-being. At-risk describes those who cannot fully meet their needs with current income and need assistance to meet their needs. Safe families are those who are secure in meeting most of their needs with current income and have the potential to contribute to the community's well-being.

The framework also helps to categorize the sources of support relied upon by families. The most basic level for many people is support that comes from within the family: their own individual resources or those of extended family members or friends. Another level is the business/employer, a source upon which legislation is focusing for persons who receive public assistance under the 1996 PRWORA legislation. Next is the community support, which includes support that is received from non-profit, educational, and religious institutions. The last in this classification is government transfers that support the family. Figure 2 is a conceptualization of Assistance Components of Family Economic Functioning. In the session, the four continuum points were illustrated using data from the interviews relating to participants' education, employment history, and occupation.

Figure 2
Assistance Components of Family Economic Functioning.

	CRISIS	AT-RISK	SAFE	THRIVING
WELL-BEING STATE	Many basic needs unmet—extensive assistance needed	In danger-additional assistance needed to prevent crisis	Basic needs met—some assistance	Needs and some wants met
SUPPORT SOURCE				
Personal, Individual, Family				
Business				
Community				
Government				

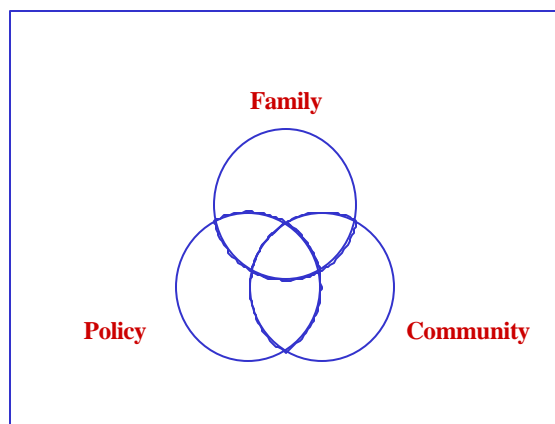
Policy Analysis

Welfare devolution challenges the manner in which public policies are studied. Researchers such as Moffitt (1996) indicated that some of the questions and situations for policy research are yet to be determined. As with any social experiment, only time and sufficient research will produce evidence for evaluating the new policy. Consistently, a general question is present: “What effects are occurring among adults and children because of welfare reform?” A National Research Council panel set some recommendations for evaluating welfare reform. Moffitt and Ver Ploeg (1999) indicate that a descriptive or monitoring study describes a population and focuses on their well-being along general and specific dimensions. Policy analyses using monitoring studies provide a baseline against which evolving changes can be measured. In the changing policy milieu related to devolution and welfare reform, qualitative research is critical for capturing the complexity and dynamics of the issues (Barnow & Moffitt, 1997). The need for identifying indicators of quality of life and well-being is critical. If these indicators are not identified, using poor-quality measures can have negative consequences (Brown & Corbett, 1997; Bauer, et al., 2000; Braun & Bauer, 1998a & b; Braun, et al., 1999).

In the scholarly debate about welfare reform, voices and experiences of those who are living in poverty are often lost in macro analysis and aggregated statistics that distance researchers from the daily struggles of low-income families. Policy makers, community leaders, and others wanting to make changes in the dynamic systems of support for self-sufficiency need to hear the experiences of families within the context of their own communities (Edin & Lein, 1997; Seccombe, 1998). Thus, qualitative research is critical to policy analysis. The integrated qualitative and quantitative research design of this study will make it possible to add human voices to abstract policy analyses.

The discussion in the session helped conference session participants to understand that low-income rural families in the context of welfare reform are best viewed from an ecological systems perspective (Figure 3) in which the family members affect each other, their own family dynamic, in addition to other families, and the quality of the community. In this case, policy also is part of the ecological system for families and community. The real challenge in analyzing low-income families in the context of welfare policy is to find ways to sustain families and communities so that they can fulfill the functions necessary to sustain society.

Figure 3
Theoretical Framework: Ecological Perspective.



As figure 3 shows, there is an interrelationship between families and communities; families and policy; communities and policy; and the interrelationship of family, policy, and communities. Failure to recognize these relationships will handicap any decisions about policy, community supports and/or families. Therefore, this research project is focusing both on each arena of action related to public assistance and especially on the interrelationships among the arenas.

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