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# Focus

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## Learnfare: The Wisconsin experience

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This article is followed by a response by Silvia R. Jackson, Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services.

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Learnfare is a welfare reform initiative—first implemented in Wisconsin—designed to encourage teenage recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits

to attend school on a regular basis. Wisconsin legislation<sup>1</sup> provides that *all* teenagers (13 through 19 years of age) who are included in an AFDC grant must be enrolled in school and meet strict attendance standards to fulfill the participation requirements of the state's work-welfare program unless they have graduated from high school or have received some form of equivalency diploma. As introduced in Wisconsin, the incentive built into the program was primarily negative in character. When teen dependents of parents receiving AFDC or teen mothers on AFDC fail to meet the attendance requirements imposed by the program, their benefits are reduced until they comply with the requirements. Currently, the Wisconsin program covers virtually all teen recipients of AFDC, approximately 30,000 each month during the 1988–89 school year. About half of them are located in Milwaukee County—the state's only large urban area. At the present time, Governor Tommy Thompson is proposing that the program be extended to AFDC recipients ages 6 through 12.

The Learnfare concept represents an expression of the “social contract” model for structuring public assistance, which emerged with considerable force in the mid-1980s. According to this model, government will provide income support and (in some cases) training and education to enhance competitiveness in the labor market on condition that the recipient fulfill an obligation to achieve a level of self-sufficiency consistent with his or her capabilities. Lawrence Mead, a conservative analyst, contributed to the acceptance of the contract premise when he noted that “federal programs that support the disadvantaged and unemployed have been permissive in character,” and stressed that “they have given benefits to their recipients but have set few requirements for how they ought to function in return.”<sup>2</sup>

For adult recipients, participation in a work-welfare program by engaging in job search or vocational training activities serves to fulfill their obligation under the implicit contract. For teenage recipients, such an expectation would be inappropriate. The new “social contract” for this population as envisioned by the New York Task Force on Poverty and Welfare organized by Democratic Governor Mario Cuomo is summarized as follows: “Society, in return for public assistance, can insist that teenagers, including teen parents, must stay in school or in an alternative learning environment if that is more appropriate.”<sup>3</sup> The intuitive appeal of Learnfare as a concept is unmistakable, and many states are studying the Wisconsin experience with great interest.

## **The socio-political context**

Public policy toward the poor has always been in a state of flux. In general, the provision of income support without obligation has been viewed with disfavor throughout much of history. The purpose of the early AFDC program was to keep impoverished mothers out of the labor force so that they could fully attend to their caretaker responsibilities. Their obligation was to provide a “fit” home for their children, a concept that states operationalized by imposing numerous conditions (e.g., no man in the house) on the receipt of public assistance. The sense of obligation attached to welfare was attenuated about two decades ago through a series of court decisions and federal administrative rules. Under the “entitlement” concept that emerged, welfare was to be provided in a simple, equitable, and standardized fashion—based largely on categorical status (number of children, marital state) and economic need. The underlying assumption of the entitlement concept was that people were poor because they didn’t have enough money. The solution was direct: provide them with the shortfall.

The 1980s witnessed a second of what Charles Murray terms a paradigm shift—a transformation in the way basic questions are framed.<sup>4</sup> Perceptions of the poor and the nature of poverty moved from an emphasis on contextual/environmental explanations to those emphasizing personal

responsibility and concerns about “behavioral dependency.”<sup>5</sup> Though “behavioral dependency” and the related notion of a “culture of poverty” are difficult to operationalize and assess empirically, they remain convenient bases for describing the intellectual and political framework within which welfare reform has come to be discussed.<sup>6</sup> When poverty was perceived as situational in character, the poor were seen as victims of environmental and opportunity constraints—a variant of the “blocked opportunity” thesis that had guided the formulation of the War on Poverty in the 1960s. To the extent that the poor are now held responsible for their own circumstances, however, it no longer seems appropriate to supply the means by which they can remain impoverished and dependent. Nor has it escaped the attention of analysts that significant social shifts have occurred; most women, even those with young children, are now in the labor force. The current debate seeks more balance, taking into account both environmental and personal factors that contribute to poverty. Learnfare, to the extent that it imposes conditions on the receipt of public assistance, represents a return to the historic way of structuring welfare.

## **A crisis? Long-term trends and immediate concerns**

Immediately upon assuming office in January 1987, Wisconsin Governor Thompson began treating welfare as a crisis requiring instant remedies. Learnfare became a top welfare reform priority. Negotiations were begun with federal officials to secure necessary waivers. A bipartisan legislative committee was established to work out an agreement that would ensure the passage of authorizing legislation in the 1987–89 biennial budget, to be voted on in June 1987. And the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) was instructed to have an operational program in place for the 1987–88 school year. Although this “fast track” timetable was not met, a partial Learnfare program covering all teen parents and teen dependents ages 13–14 was initiated in spring 1988, and the full program was in place by the beginning of the 1988–89 school year. This was a considerable achievement given the complexity of the undertaking.

It is not clear whether the sense of crisis that apparently motivated the rush to implement Learnfare was justified. When viewed over time, many of the aggregate numbers used to indicate how the poor were faring could be seen as salutary. High school dropout rates, for example, have been declining for some time. Whereas 36.3 percent of white adults (ages 25–29) had not completed high school in 1960, the comparable statistic in 1985 was 13.2 percent.<sup>7</sup> Progress among blacks has been even more striking. Three out of five did not earn a high school diploma in 1960. By 1985 this proportion had fallen to less than one in five (17.6 percent).<sup>8</sup> Indices of literacy also had improved. The proportion of blacks reading at “adept” or “intermediate” levels rose

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from 41.1 percent in 1970 to 65.8 percent in 1985.<sup>9</sup> And despite popular impression, the birthrates for teens have been declining. Since 1960, expected births per teenaged woman have dropped from .80 to .51 for blacks and from .40 to .21 for whites, though a greater proportion of the births are nonmarital.<sup>10</sup>

This apparent progress, far from suggesting that there may be no need for draconian measures for those left behind, tends to focus media and public attention more insistently on the likely long-term poor. If others can make it, what is the matter with those who don't? The welfare dynamics literature indicates that most of those who must resort to welfare require only temporary assistance to help them through a difficult period (such as a divorce or illness). Of new entrants to public assistance, only 30 percent will eventually become chronically dependent—generally defined as welfare careers that exceed eight years. Yet, at any given point in time, 60 percent or more of the caseload will be long-term recipients, and it is these who capture the bulk of the welfare resources and public concern.<sup>11</sup>

Recent empirical work has confirmed what has long been suspected. Those recipients who obtain welfare at an early age, who never marry, and who have low earning capacity (poor work history, lack of a high school diploma) are more likely to become long-term welfare users.<sup>12</sup> And the children of long-term welfare recipients are more likely to become dependent themselves.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as the proportion of high school graduates continues to grow, those without a diploma encounter severe disadvantages in a changing labor market. William Julius Wilson stresses that a high school diploma has become the sine qua non for even the most menial jobs in urban areas.<sup>14</sup>

There is another reason for concern about those who fail to complete high school. Society can ill afford to lose the productive capabilities of any of today's youth. Analysts looking into the future predict a labor shortage alongside a chronically unemployed group. They estimate that only 14 percent of new jobs created through the year 2000 will not require a high school education, and that the majority of those entering the work force will be from groups we now call minorities.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, underlying each discussion about Learnfare is a concern about and fear of the "underclass." As discussed in the last issue of *Focus*,<sup>16</sup> this group has not been well defined, though most definitions include such attributes as income poverty, nonproductive behaviors, chronic dependency, and neighborhood environment. Whatever definition is employed, most observers believe the phenomenon has grown, though it still describes only a small proportion of the poor—perhaps 6 to 10 percent.<sup>17</sup> The numbers notwithstanding, the image of the lives of minority children being lost in drug-infested, decaying communities is compelling and an incentive to precipitate action. The message of Learnfare—directed toward those at greatest risk of falling into life patterns marked by chronic poverty—is clear; there will be costs for behaviors associated with what society identifies as counterproductive behavior.

### Implementation: The "fast track" and its cost

Only fourteen months elapsed between the time when Learnfare was proposed and the effective start-up of operations, truly an example of "fast track" enactment and implementation. This is all the more remarkable given that four institutional domains were involved: the federal government, the state legislature, the bureaucracies (welfare and education), and the client advocacy groups. Federal officials were particularly cooperative. Although they balked at the state's original proposal to make school attendance an eligibility factor for AFDC, they were enthusiastic about the sanction approach—suggesting that the initiative might be rationalized as an extension of the participation requirements of the state's work-welfare program. Furthermore, they did not require rigorous experimental evaluation of the

program (as was required for other waivers the state was seeking).

The posture within the state legislature was more cautious but apparently accepting of the initiative in principle, particularly when viewed as a quid pro quo for other reform initiatives favored by the Democratic opposition, who controlled both houses of the legislature. The language approved by the legislature in June 1987 and submitted to the governor for his signature covered *only* teen parents on AFDC; sanctions could be imposed *only* if child care was available; the student had an opportunity to participate in a school-administered service program, "Children at Risk"; and it was reasonable to expect the teen to graduate by age 20.

The bureaucracy energetically confronted the challenge of implementing a statewide program that required the cooperation of 72 county-administered welfare offices and over 400 school districts. The advocacy groups essentially were ignored. Three poorly publicized hearings were held that were attended by a total of 26 individuals.

Between May 1987, when the waiver request was submitted, and March 1988, when a partial program was in place, the implementation process became political and opposition crystallized. In Wisconsin, the so-called line item veto allows the governor to strike out sentences, words, numbers, and even punctuation before signing the budget bill. By striking out selected portions of the Learnfare legislation, the governor, in effect, expanded the program to all teen recipients and removed other conditions (e.g., referral to the "At Risk" program) that were to be met before the sanction could be imposed. In the rush to implement, program architects relied upon the promulgation of emergency rules by DHSS.<sup>18</sup> The September start-up goal was missed when the federal waiver was not received until October 1987. Then, on November 4, the Legislative Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules (JCRAR) voted to suspend the proposed rules and presented DHSS with twenty concerns, several stemming from the governor's vetoes and others representing questions raised by the celerity with which the complex program was being implemented. By this point public support for the program was undeniable, so a deal was cut to stagger the implementation (start with teen parents and young teen dependents). JCRAR rescinded the suspension in December 1987, but negative feelings persisted about the process by which the program was enacted.<sup>19</sup>

Putting Learnfare together was not easy. In January 1988, DHSS learned that a substantial number of errors were being made in identifying those potentially subject to a sanction, particularly in Milwaukee County. By now recipients had been notified several times that the program was about to begin only to have the start-up delayed again. Concerned about the possible magnitude of suspected information-processing errors, Timothy Cullen, who was Secretary of DHSS at the time, ordered state staff to contact by phone or in person every AFDC family that would be affected by the

legislation to explain the program and verify the status of children subject to the attendance requirement. According to DHSS officials, this was accomplished by March 1, and the limited version of Learnfare was under way. The full program, covering all AFDC teens, was implemented in September 1988. Whether or not the myriad of technical and procedural problems were resolved is unclear. The Milwaukee office of Legal Action of Wisconsin (LAW) claims that they are winning two-thirds of the several hundred appeals they have initiated on behalf of sanctioned clients.

## Essentials of the Wisconsin Learnfare program

Learnfare in Wisconsin depends upon a system of close monitoring of student attendance and the prompt imposition of sanctions. At every six-month AFDC interview, the attendance record of each teen covered by the program is examined. If the student has ten or more unexcused absences or has dropped out of school, compliance with the Learnfare provisions is monitored by the county income maintenance office. Each month, the agency mails a list of students to be monitored to the appropriate school district. The schools send back a record of the number of full days the monitored student is absent.

A monitored student may have no more than two unexcused, full-day absences in a month. If the record shows more, the family's AFDC check is reduced in the second month after the noncompliant behavior. To set the amount of the sanction, the noncompliant member of the AFDC family is ignored in calculating the grant amount. Sanctions vary from \$58 in large families to \$192 in two-person families, the average sanction being about \$100. If a sanctioned dependent teen (a nonparent) is the only minor in the AFDC family, a partial grant will be continued for three months, after which the case will be closed.<sup>20</sup> The full grant is restored when compliance has been documented.

Some students are exempted. Good-cause exemptions from the rule of unexcused absences include the following:

1. The student is expelled from school and alternative schooling is not available.
2. The teen has a child under 3 months of age.
3. No licensed day care is available for the child(ren) of teen parents subject to Learnfare.
4. Prohibitive transportation problems exist (e.g., to and from day care).
5. The teen is over 16 years of age and not expected to graduate from high school by age 20.

No fact-finding is undertaken before the sanction process is initiated (that is, nothing is done to verify that the unexcused absences have actually occurred). AFDC families who are subject to a sanction can appeal that decision. Generally, the family is notified of the impending sanction between the 10th and 13th day of the month following that month during which

the attendance irregularities were documented. If the family files an appeal before the sanction is actually imposed (on the first day of the month following their notification), the family will be entitled to full benefits until the validity of the appeal has been determined. If the appeal is denied in this circumstance, the state will recover that portion of their grant subject to the sanction for the period of time the sanction was in force. Families also have 45 days to file an appeal after the sanction is imposed. In this circumstance, the sanction will remain in effect, though the state will be required to make up any underpayment should the appeal subsequently be decided in the client's favor.

### **The first full year: A lost opportunity to learn**

Despite political and procedural difficulties, a working Learnfare program was in place for the 1988–89 school year. Given the national interest in the initiative, the program provided a marvelous opportunity to examine the numerous process and outcome issues attendant on Learnfare—an opportunity that was not capitalized upon. Federal officials did not insist upon an experimental evaluation as a condition for granting the waiver. State officials eschewed legislative suggestions that the concept be piloted and evaluated before being fully implemented. Baseline data on school attendance patterns were not collected in a systematic fashion, so carrying out meaningful analyses will be extremely difficult. The Employment and Training Institute (ETI) of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee will carry out a formal evaluation, but the enabling contract has only recently been signed—a year after the program was initiated.

Based upon preliminary administrative data available in August 1989,<sup>21</sup> claims have been made that the program is a success. It has been noted, for example, that the average length of a sanction during the 1988–89 school year was about three months and that some 70 percent of students sanctioned were penalized for three months or less. The conclusion drawn from these numbers, as publicized by DHSS, is that the sanction induced students to return to the classroom. While this could very well be the case, it is impossible to make such an inference from the data. For one thing, the sanctions could have been terminated for a variety of reasons—people move and/or leave welfare all the time; they appeal and have their grant restored; they find ways to circumvent regulations; they “age into” (turn 13) and/or “age out of” (turn 20) the program during the school year. For another, DHSS apparently assumes that the sanction months were consecutive (two or three months of noncompliance followed by continuing compliance with the attendance requirements). This may not be the case. Nor is there a way of knowing if it was the sanction that induced the change in behavior. Some other factor could have been responsible, such as the availability of child care.

The dangers associated with rushing judgment about the success of the program are exemplified by a subsequent DHSS

analysis of the data, done in September 1989.<sup>22</sup> This analysis looked only at teens who were monitored by Learnfare for at least four consecutive months during the school year. Fewer than half of all teens sanctioned over the course of the year met that criterion (3,233 out of 7,234). Of those 3,233 teens, slightly more than half (54 percent) returned to school *within* three months, but only 38 percent returned to school and were *still* there after three months. These numbers are decidedly less optimistic than those publicized earlier.

The bottom line is that the available numbers tell us nothing about the effectiveness of the program. It may well be that the actual—though unmeasured—success of Learnfare is attributable to the extent to which it deters teens from engaging in noncompliant behavior in the first place. Given the limitations of these data, we simply do not know. Since there is no control group or even some reasonable nonequivalent comparison group, the numbers can only serve as descriptive outcomes and cannot be used as indicators of program impact. The essential question is what *would* have been the attendance patterns (or school performance or some other measure of success) of the students in the *absence* of the program when compared with those exposed to the program. At this point, that question cannot be answered and, in fact, may never be answered from the initial Wisconsin experience.

The administrative data do provide descriptive information about the first year. Table 1 (on page 6) shows what proportion of Learnfare teens were located in Milwaukee versus the balance of the state and what the sanction rates were for each month of the school year. Ignoring November, a start-up month based upon September's school attendance information, the statewide sanction rates exhibit a curvilinear pattern. They quickly drop from over 9 percent to 7 percent before steadily climbing once again to 10 percent by the end of the school year. It is clear that this pattern is driven by the numbers in Milwaukee, where more than three-fourths of the sanctions occurred. There, the sanction rate evidenced a disturbing climb from about 11 percent in February to almost 17 percent at the end of the school year.

A cursory review of the available administrative data gives us the following picture. As suggested above, the mean number of months a given teen was sanctioned during the nine months of the school year was three months, with virtually no difference between Milwaukee and the rest of the state. The average for younger dependent teens (i.e., those ages 13–14 who are not parents themselves) was the lowest (2.5 months), whereas older dependent teens had the highest mean figure (3.1 months). Excluding the September start-up month, it would appear that no more than one in twenty of those sanctioned at all were penalized for the entire year, with older dependent teens having the highest rate (6 percent).

County size was related to sanction rates. As indicated, the average monthly sanction rate for Milwaukee County was in

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of Learnfare Teens in Milwaukee County**  
**and Balance of State and Percentage Sanctioned,**  
**1988-89 School Year**

Month	Milwaukee <sup>a</sup>		Balance of State <sup>b</sup>		State Totals	
	% of Learnfare Teens	% Sanct.	% of Learnfare Teens	% Sanct.	% of Learnfare Teens	% Sanct.
November	47.9%	7.5%	52.1%	2.5%	100%	4.9%
December	48.1	15.5	51.9	3.3	"	9.2
January	47.9	12.0	52.1	3.2	"	7.4
February	47.5	11.2	52.5	3.1	"	7.0
March	47.3	11.3	52.7	3.5	"	7.2
April	47.2	11.3	52.8	3.5	"	7.2
May	47.0	11.6	53.0	3.5	"	7.4
June	47.5	15.1	52.5	3.9	"	9.3
July	48.0	16.9	52.0	3.7	"	10.0
Total period	47.6	12.5	52.4	3.4	100	7.7

Source: DHSS administrative data.

Note: The sanction is applied two months *after* the attendance requirements are not met.

<sup>a</sup>Average number of teens covered was 14,634.

<sup>b</sup>Average number of teens covered was 16,107.

excess of 12 percent (considerably higher toward the end of the school year). For counties containing 3 to 5 percent of the Learnfare population, the sanction rate was 6.1 percent; for those containing between 2 and 3 percent of the target population, it was 3.8 percent; and for the smaller-sized counties it was less than 3 percent.

Failing to be enrolled in school accounted for about one-fifth of all sanctions. Failure to comply with the minimal monthly attendance requirement accounted for fully half of the sanctions imposed, with the remainder due to a failure by the student to verify his/her situation or some combination of factors. Not surprisingly, dropping out of school as a reason for being sanctioned was found disproportionately among teen parents—accounting for 45 percent of the sanctions in this group—and tended to be found less often among the younger teen dependent group (accounting for less than 10 percent of the sanctions).

Based upon a review of one month's data (April 1989), it would appear that older dependent teens face the highest probability of being sanctioned when they are out of compliance with Learnfare provisions. Of the 11,585 younger dependent teens covered by Learnfare, only 264 (2 percent) were sanctioned, whereas a handful (32) received an exemption. However, of the 14,110 older dependent teens in the program, 1,491 (11 percent) were sanctioned and an additional 91 were exempted. Of 5,208 teen parents covered by

Learnfare, 522 were sanctioned (10 percent) and 597 (11 percent) were presumably liable to a sanction but received an exemption. Not being expected to graduate by age 20 and lack of child care accounted for over 80 percent of the exemptions. This suggests that while about 20 percent of teen parents nominally are out of compliance with Learnfare provisions, they are more likely to be exempted from a penalty than other covered groups.

### **Without good numbers, the debate remains normative**

From a purely political perspective, the rush to implement was defensible. It did not matter that, as noted earlier, the long-term school attendance and literacy indices had been moving in a positive direction, nor that the state's AFDC rolls had begun to decline in mid-1986—presumably in response to an improved economy. The perception of a welfare crisis, an education crisis, and an urban underclass crisis remained. Herbert Grover, the Wisconsin Superintendent of Public Instruction, recently stressed that any measure that gets children into the classroom is worthwhile and, while noting that high school dropout rates from the Milwaukee public school system still exceed 40 percent, indicated support for finding some way to extend the Learnfare principle beyond the welfare population.<sup>23</sup> The fact that—as recently headlined in the *Milwaukee Journal*<sup>24</sup>—over half of

all births in Milwaukee in 1988 were out of wedlock heightens the sense of crisis. (That there were fewer births to married women—which partly accounted for the high proportion of nonmarital births—remains an obscure sidenote.) The sense of crisis persists. Getting the program going can be seen as a no-lose situation. If it succeeds in keeping teens in school, it may help improve their long-term prospects. If it does not, the state will save money by invoking the sanctions.

We interviewed a number of persons involved in the planning and implementing of Learnfare and found widespread support for the program in principle, even among those who were initially cool to the idea (e.g., the educational bureaucracy and Milwaukee County officials). There is considerably more agreement than might be expected for the proposition that welfare recipients—as part of a social contract—owe something to the state in exchange for the benefits they receive. And increasing school attendance was something that virtually all observers wanted, or as one Milwaukee official put it, “this at least gets their attention and into the front door where we have a shot at helping them.” What is far less clear, and is a matter of continuing debate, is whether government is living up to its responsibilities under the general premise of the new “social contract.”

The failure to develop the Learnfare concept carefully, to implement it with deliberation, and to conduct thorough process and impact evaluations right from the start leaves policymakers debating values and perceptions rather than focusing on useful information and analyzable experience. Proponents bend “so what” data (outcome numbers that cannot be compared to similar individuals not in the program) in order to make claims of success that cannot be substantiated. Opponents rely upon anecdote and impression to argue the case against the program. Virtually all of the issues raised at the beginning of the program remain today as the legislature considers expansion and as other states consider initiating such a program. We briefly review a few of these outstanding issues.

### **What will it accomplish?**

Success depends upon what is expected. If the objective is increased attendance *and* if the underlying theoretical model that poor attendance and dropping out of high school result from impoverished motivation and lack of parental supervision is accurate, the Learnfare intervention is at least plausible. From the beginning, however, the stated goals have been more ambitious: to “break the cycle of poverty” and “restore the firm hand of the missing father.”<sup>25</sup> It is a matter of debate whether sanction-induced class attendance will overcome the multiple disadvantages faced by some of the families at which the program is aimed. Some critics see it as an inexpensive “silver bullet” designed to avoid the kinds of service interventions needed to address the complex set of social and behavioral challenges posed by the chronically dependent.

### **Is it fair?**

The program continues to evoke a plethora of equity issues. Shouldn't there be penalties for all truant students and not just those who are economically disadvantaged and on welfare? Is it fair to penalize an entire family for the behavior of one member—particularly if the offender is an older and incorrigible teen? Are all teens at equal risk given the (allegedly) wide variance in local attitudes toward the program and—more critically—variance in administrative procedures? Is the lack of due process—the kind of fact-finding and mediation available to adult recipients participating in work-welfare—prima facie evidence of inequity?

### **Unknown impacts on families and schools**

A sensitive balance exists between teens and their parents. Learnfare presumably alters that balance by putting an economic weapon in the hands of teens, since their behavior now determines the size of the welfare grant. It is also conceivable that the economic insecurity introduced by Learnfare can increase intrafamily stress and counteract the behavioral changes intended by the sanctions. In any event, it is plausibly argued that the loss of income for those already facing economic hardship will have harsh effects on these families. Such impacts remain speculative given how little has been learned to date. It is also conceivable that Learnfare might adversely affect the general learning environment in some classrooms if unmotivated Learnfare-induced returnees disrupt classes or require disproportionate attention.<sup>26</sup> We posed such hypothetical possibilities to a number of individuals involved in the Learnfare initiative as well as to some critical of the program. There were no informed guesses as to the validity of these possibilities.

### **Is government in breach of contract?**

As part of the compromise whereby JCRAR rescinded its suspension of the DHSS emergency rules, funds were made available to support child care and transportation expenses for teen mothers. Beyond that, the Learnfare initiative is little more than a sanction. The governor has continued to resist providing additional resources to support outreach and family-based interventions to address the numerous factors associated with truancy and educational maladjustment (vetoing attempts to increase the availability and accessibility of such services in the 1989–91 biennial budget). His rationale is that guaranteeing services to teens at risk of sanction would impose an inordinate burden on local governments and school districts. It had been assumed that the Department of Public Instruction's Children-at-Risk program, if made available to all children at risk of dropping out of school, would be sufficient for this need, but this assumption was not borne out by subsequent experience. For some, the lack of services is evidence that government is not living up to its part of the “social contract.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Continuing administrative difficulties**

Learnfare is a complex undertaking, requiring coordination and cooperation among many institutions—state agencies,

county social service agencies, public school districts, private schools, and independent service agencies. Significant efforts were made to pull the various actors together and coordinate their activities, particularly in Milwaukee County, where a task force was established. Still, the information processing requirements are extraordinary and, if the client advocates are correct, numerous errors continue to be made. On a more systemic level, variation in key definitions and practices abounds. In some parts of northern Wisconsin, absence from school during hunting season is excused; in Milwaukee it is not. Some school districts require a written note from the parent when their child is absent; others will accept a phone message. Some counties hired specialists to help start the program; others did not. Some counties expended resources to provide services to teens likely to be sanctioned; and, again, others did not. Even in small matters, such as the number of times attendance is monitored during a day and how much discretion is permitted school officials in determining an excused absence, the program varies. No systematic attempt was made—nor would it likely have succeeded—to impose uniformity across the state nor (with the exception of large districts like Milwaukee) to ensure the adequacy of administrative practices.<sup>28</sup>

## Getting back on track

Learnfare is an expression of quaint, enduring concepts such as civic virtue, self-reliance, and personal responsibility. It positions education and human capital development at the very center of government's responsibility to the disadvantaged:

The moral foundation of the modern welfare state rests on linked assumptions about welfare and education. Welfare fills the gap occasioned by the absence of work. For the able bodied, welfare is meant to be transient; education, for every member of society, is meant to be lasting. The latter should obviate the need for the former. Long-term welfare dependency—as distinct from the actual receipt of welfare by an individual for a specified period of time—should not exist.<sup>29</sup>

As a concept, Learnfare represents an initiative quite consistent with the main thrust of contemporary debate and invokes comparisons with the “hand up, not handout” theme of the War on Poverty: government help should enhance individual opportunity rather than correct unequal economic outcomes; programs that emphasize mutual obligations (government and recipient) should replace entitlements; and services should be reintegrated with the provision of income support.

Ultimately, the Learnfare debate—as with most reform issues—must move beyond philosophical and political disputes. Teens must stay in school and avoid nonmarital births if their life prospects are to be improved. By the end of their teen years, about 20 percent of white women and 45 percent of black women will have become pregnant. Most of these

pregnancies will result in out-of-wedlock births—about one in two for white teens (an eightfold increase over the past three decades) and about nine out of ten for black teens. Moreover, teen mothers are about half as likely to finish high school as their peers and, if unmarried, have a 50 percent probability of being on welfare within two years. Although a high school diploma does not ensure economic well-being, it continues to be related to one's relative economic position. In the mid-1980s, men 25–29 years old could expect to earn less in real dollars than their counterparts in the early 1970s irrespective of how many years of schooling they had completed. However, those with a high school diploma could expect to earn roughly 60 percent more than those with less schooling, and college graduates could expect to earn 60 percent more than those with only a high school education. The decline in real earnings since the early 1970s has been most severe for those with less education.<sup>30</sup>

The continuing debate about Learnfare in Wisconsin involves conceptions about approach rather than the essential merit of the idea. In this respect, Mickey Kaus makes a simple yet useful distinction between what he terms the “hardheads” and the “softheads” in the basic approach to welfare reform.<sup>31</sup> The “hards” tend to focus on dependency and favor short-term interventions that emphasize deterrence. The “softs,” on the other hand, place more credence in the ability of positive economic incentives to induce desirable behaviors and in the capacity of services to overcome personal and structural barriers to the attainment of self-sufficiency.

Most critics of the Learnfare initiative concur that the program has improved communication between the welfare and education systems in Wisconsin. Some anticipate that this forced marriage will ultimately result in coordinated programs that go beyond attendance to grapple honestly with the challenges associated with improving the human capital of the severely disadvantaged. But the critics assert—not without justification—that the Wisconsin model is incomplete and fails to achieve the *mutual obligation* required by the new “social contract.” Particularly for the “softs,” the lack of outreach and family intervention, the absence of in-depth fact-finding before the initiation of the sanction process, the lack of positive inducements, and the failure to ensure (rather than assume the existence of) a broader array of support services for Learnfare students constitute major flaws in the program as introduced.

Interest in the Learnfare concept is extensive. One DHSS official notes that some forty states had inquired about the Wisconsin program. According to Josie Fohrenbach, most of the states actively attempting to develop similar programs in 1987–88 adopted “softer” and more balanced strategies.<sup>32</sup> The typical plan called for a case manager to work directly with at-risk teens and for supportive services to the target population. The Minnesota plan, for example, would require a contract specifying an individualized educational plan. In Ohio the search for balance led to a proposal containing both positive *and* negative economic incentives.

What other states seemed to grasp is that “breaking the cycle of poverty” requires intensive collaboration between the education and welfare bureaucracies. The Ford Foundation overviews the extraordinary outpouring of experimental efforts to enhance the opportunities and performance of disadvantaged students in its report titled *The Common Good: Social Welfare and the American Future*.<sup>33</sup> These experiments include (1) incentive programs to keep youth in school and introduce reforms to make their educational experience more rewarding; (2) interventions designed to integrate remedial study, work experience, and vocational preparation; and (3) collaborative efforts between schools and the business community on the local level. For example, some 22 percent of 9,000 school districts surveyed in 1984 had adopted some form of business-sponsored “adopt a school” program.

The sense of immediacy surrounding the implementation of Learnfare in Wisconsin precluded a careful consideration of the problematic issues inherent in such a program. As other states entertain plans to start, expand, or revise such an initiative, it may be prudent to carefully consider the following:

- Who should be covered by the program? Teen parents are a natural target group but what about other teens or younger children on AFDC? There are compelling arguments for starting with younger children, who are more controllable and have not yet internalized counterproductive habits.
- How expansive should the program be? Moving to cover a broad target group may result in an effort that is “a mile wide and an inch deep.” Limited resources may suggest that efforts be targeted on the more disadvantaged students.
- What is the nature of the client obligation? Is attendance all that will be required? Conceivably, the program can build in provisions for acknowledging performance, for including other activities to help teens in adulthood (work experience, parenting classes, etc.), and for supporting other behaviors consistent with good citizenship.
- What is to be the nature of the incentives? Manipulating welfare guarantees is a most accessible lever for inducing desired behaviors. Both positive and negative incentives would ensure a more balanced program.
- What support and parallel services will be provided? Clearly, child care for teen parents is necessary. But the array of alternative educational settings, special intervention models, and individualized curricula upon which to build a comprehensive program is extensive. The structure of the model is critical if the program is to be focused on education rather than attendance.
- What about the host of process questions: case management and decision-making, ensuring confidentiality and the protection of rights, providing for administrative comparability across jurisdictions, and so forth. It

takes little imagination to envision the complex issues in this area.

- How can one know if it is working? This involves thinking through what the program is really about and making the investment to ensure that more than “so what” numbers are available when the hard, political questions are asked.

Wisconsin has demonstrated that sanctions can be imposed on the school-aged welfare population on a large scale. A fuller expression of the new “social contract,” one that realistically addresses the challenges posed by the severely disadvantaged, remains to be tested.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion: A concept in transition

The logistical and operational obstacles to mounting a program of this magnitude were formidable. Indeed, some of the expedient measures employed to “get the program going” may well have been necessary and the consequent shortcomings unavoidable. Taking the time to work out all definitions fully, to put in place a sophisticated evaluation component before commencing operations, and to develop a comprehensive supportive case-management plan would have delayed implementation considerably. Whether the apparent costs associated with the “fast track” approach to implementation are offset by the success of actually initiating a program remains a normative question that goes beyond this brief review.

“Doing” public policy, fortunately, is a continuing process. The state’s initial experience with the program does not necessarily capture the dynamics of how the program is evolving or where it may be going. As noted more fully in the second Learnfare article in this issue (“Learnfare: The State’s Perspective”), the seeds of a more complete and mature social contract were present in the original version of the program and are clearly evidenced in the proposal to expand the program. For example, some funds to support alternative education opportunities for older teens in Milwaukee County were made available during the first year of operations. More important, the proposal to expand the program to children ages 6–12 who are recipients of AFDC incorporates into its design a fuller complement of case-management initiatives.

The Learnfare concept, much like Workfare for adult AFDC recipients, is in transition. Both were envisioned as representing the perspective of the “hards”—strategies for moving welfare clients toward self-sufficiency by imposing costs on dependency-perpetuating behaviors. During the early years of the Reagan presidency, for example, there was a considerable push for conventional workfare initiatives, one outcome of which was the Community Work Experience Program (CWEP). That push for workfare slowly evolved toward more broadly conceptualized employment and training programs for welfare recipients that combine work requirements with training and education opportunities—a

public policy outcome illustrated in the design of the JOBS component of the recently enacted Family Support Act. A similar evolution can be anticipated for Learnfare, as policy-makers struggle with the challenge of “breaking the cycle of poverty.” ■

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<sup>1</sup>1987 Wisconsin Act 27, Section 49.50(7).

<sup>2</sup>Lawrence Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligation of Citizenship* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>New York State Task Force, “A New Social Contract—Rethinking the Nature and Purpose of Public Assistance,” Report of the Task Force on Poverty and Welfare, submitted to Governor Mario Cuomo, 1986, as quoted in *Welfare Policy for the 1990s*, ed. Phoebe H. Cottingham and David T. Ellwood (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 162.

<sup>4</sup>Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>See Michael Novak et al., *A Community of Self-Reliance: The New Consensus on Family and Welfare* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1987).

<sup>6</sup>See the popular works of George Gilder (*Wealth and Poverty* [New York: Basic Books, 1981]); Ken Auletta (*The Underclass* [New York: Random House, 1982]); Murray (*Losing Ground*); and Mead (*Beyond Entitlement*).

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Jencks, “What Is the Underclass—And Is It Growing?” *Focus*, 12:1 (Spring and Summer 1989), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood, *The Dynamics of Dependence: The Routes to Self-Sufficiency* (Cambridge, Mass.: Urban Systems Research, 1983); and “Slipping Into and Out of Poverty: The Dynamics of Spells,” *Journal of Human Resources*, 21 (Winter 1986), 1–23.

<sup>12</sup>David Ellwood, “Targeting ‘Would-Be’ Long-Term Recipients of AFDC,” Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., Princeton, N.J., 1986.

<sup>13</sup>See Irwin Garfinkel and Sara McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children* (Washington D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1986).

<sup>14</sup>Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup>Another way to view the relationship between the labor market and poverty/dependency is to focus on structural changes in the economy and concentrated, chronic impoverishment in urban areas. See William Julius Wilson and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “Poverty, Joblessness, and the Social Transformation of the Inner City,” in *Welfare Policy for the 1990s*, pp. 70–102.

<sup>16</sup>*Focus*, 12:1. The entire issue explores definitions of the underclass.

<sup>17</sup>Isabel Sawhill, ed., *Challenge to Leadership: Economic and Social Issues for the Next Decade* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1988), Chap. 7.

<sup>18</sup>Emergency rules are those proposed by an executive agency for the purpose of implementing legislative intent without requiring complete legislative review and public input.

<sup>19</sup>One client advocacy group, Legal Action of Wisconsin, filed a suit questioning the legality of Learnfare as implemented. The action was dismissed in November 1988.

<sup>20</sup>As of July 1, 1989, if the only dependent child is sanctioned, the AFDC grant continues indefinitely for the parent as permitted under a change in federal law provided in the JOBS regulations of the Family Support Act. Prior to July 1989, benefits to the parent were provided for only three months at 100 percent state expense. According to DHSS officials, the state incurred this expense so parents could maintain a home while they worked with the child to get him or her to return to school or to improve attendance.

<sup>21</sup>This section relies on DHSS administrative data prepared by Neil Gleason and Carol Weidel.

<sup>22</sup>Based upon an internal DHSS memo from Carol Weidel to Diane Waller, September 11, 1989.

<sup>23</sup>Comments made by Mr. Grover on “Wisconsin Week,” WHA-TV, shown on September 22, 1989.

<sup>24</sup>*Milwaukee Journal*, September 8, 1989, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup>These were cited often as the program goals by Timothy Cullen when he served as Secretary of DHSS.

<sup>26</sup>Rutgers sociologist Jackson Toby argues that it is counterproductive to force apathetic and hostile students to return to school. See “The Dropout Controversy—Coercion or Choice?” in *The Public Interest*, No. 96 (Summer 1989), pp. 134–136.

<sup>27</sup>A number of counties have pushed for intensive services targeted on the most disadvantaged students. For example, Dane County developed “Project Bootstraps” and Milwaukee County is planning, with DHSS assistance, a program called “Project Crossroads.” These are very modest efforts—the Milwaukee program will only reach 100 students and their families.

<sup>28</sup>DHSS provided Milwaukee County with four staff persons during the Learnfare start-up period.

<sup>29</sup>Denis Doyle, “Welfare Dependency and Education: Is There a Connection?” in *Ladders Out of Poverty*, ed. Jack Meyer (Washington D.C.: American Horizons Foundation, 1986), p. 129.

<sup>30</sup>The material in this paragraph was drawn from *The Common Good: Social Welfare and the American Future*, Ford Foundation Project on Social Welfare and the American Future (New York: The Ford Foundation, 1989), Chap. 3.

<sup>31</sup>Kaus, “Revenge of the Softheads,” *New Republic*, June 19, 1989, pp. 24–27.

<sup>32</sup>Josie Fohrenbach, “Learnfare: A Questionable Experiment,” Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, D.C., 1988.

<sup>33</sup>See *The Common Good*.

<sup>34</sup>A substantial amount of experimentation on how to intervene effectively with “at risk” teens, particularly teen parents, continues. See Patricia Auspos, with Marilyn Price, *Launching Jobstart: A Demonstration for Dropouts in the JTPA System* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1987); Denise Polit, Janet Quint, and James Riccio, *The Challenge of Serving Teenage Mothers* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1988). More recent intervention models in Newark and Camden, N.J., and Chicago are being evaluated by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

# Learnfare: The state's perspective

by Silvia R. Jackson

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Silvia R. Jackson, Administrator, Division of Economic Support, Department of Health and Social Services of the State of Wisconsin, reviewed the preceding article and comments on it here. Her comments are divided into four sections: clarifications of main themes presented in the article; objections to specific statements; comment on questions raised by Learnfare; and a conclusion.

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## Clarifications of major themes presented in the article

### Services to the at-risk population

The article does not mention many of the significant program components that have contributed greatly to the overall success of Learnfare to date. For instance, the Department allocated \$1.2 million in the 1988-89 school year for alternative education for 18 and 19 year old Learnfare teens. The availability of this funding has encouraged and enabled many teen dropouts to return to school. Alternative programs funded through Learnfare offer specialized programming to meet the special needs of students. Many also offer on-site day care, parenting skills training, and other programming designed to benefit the student. Alternative education funding is available statewide to assist teens who have dropped out of school to return.

The Department also provides funding for three Learnfare case managers in Milwaukee County to assist teen dropouts. During the 1988-89 school year, 300 Milwaukee teens who had dropped out of school returned to alternative education programs as a direct result of the intervention by these Learnfare case managers. An additional 387 dropouts under age 18 agreed to return to the Milwaukee Public School system (MPS) again after being contacted and assisted by Learnfare case managers. Many counties in addition to Milwaukee have implemented similar procedures through funding made available through Learnfare Income Maintenance Administration and the Job Opportunity and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program of the Family Support Act of 1988.

The article indicates in several places that the Learnfare program is strictly punitive and that no services are offered. This is simply not correct. State and county staff statewide did outreach to "at-risk" teens before Learnfare sanctions began and have increased their efforts since program implementation. In Milwaukee, in addition to the three case managers mentioned above, the Department now funds six full-time positions in the Milwaukee County Department of Social Services, assigned to operate the Learnfare Hotline, to respond to client inquiries about Learnfare, to ensure the accuracy of sanctions, and to address fair hearing issues. Beginning January 1, 1990, the Department will also fund two full-time Milwaukee Public School positions, again assigned to ensure the integrity of the program and provide services.

### Changes in the proposed expansion of the program

I would especially like to clarify that the proposed expansion of Learnfare is not simply an expansion of the existing program. Significant changes are anticipated, including the addition of a case-management component designed to serve at-risk AFDC children. Concerns with the current program will also be addressed during the expansion effort. For example, the Department of Health and Social Services and the Department of Public Instruction will work closely with local schools and social service agencies to develop a definition of "at-risk" for Learnfare purposes that is consistent with the state's Children-at-Risk, truancy, and compulsory attendance laws. Under the expanded program, families with children at risk will receive case-management services to address problems which contribute to poor school attendance. The case-management component will include referrals to treatment for alcohol and other drug abuse and for child abuse, and it will make referrals for other social services as appropriate, in addition to working with the family and school to assure that the child is placed in an appropriate educational program. As long as the family complies with the provisions of the case-management plan, no sanction will be imposed.

### Input of advocacy groups

To say that "advocacy groups essentially were ignored" is not at all accurate. Many of the provisions in the current law

and rule are there, at least in part, as a result of input we received from various advocates, including

- Basing sanctions on full days of unexcused absence and not allowing partial days to be counted at all;
- Inclusion of the name and phone number of a contact person at the school for the Children-at-Risk program on the Learnfare notices, in addition to referring children to the at-risk program;
- Confidentiality provisions limiting access of Learnfare information to the school attendance officers;
- The good-cause provision that allows the income maintenance agency to override an unexcused absence for several reasons.

We have also had numerous meetings with advocates since the implementation of Learnfare to discuss concerns they have with the program. They are also represented at the monthly Learnfare meetings in Milwaukee. It is very misleading and incorrect for this article to indicate that advocates have been ignored.

The Department held three public hearings on the Learnfare rules in Madison, Milwaukee, and Wausau on April 19, 21, and 26, 1988. The Department followed the procedure that is used for all changes to income maintenance policy in notifying counties and other interested persons of the hearings. For Learnfare, the notice of the hearings appeared in the *Wisconsin Administrative Register* on March 31, 1988. A notice of hearing was mailed out on March 9, 1988, to all persons on the Division of Community Services mailing list. This list includes advocacy organizations as well as many others. A notice was also sent to all counties and tribal agencies on April 5, 1988.

#### **Status of AFDC recipient if only dependent child is sanctioned**

As of July 1, 1989, if the only dependent child is sanctioned, the AFDC grant continues indefinitely for the parent because of a change in federal law included in the JOBS provisions of the Family Support Act of 1988. Prior to July 1989, payment was provided for three months at 100 percent state expense. This was not an allowable expense under our federal waiver. We provided this support using state dollars so parents could maintain a home while they worked with their children to help them get back to school or improve attendance.

#### **Shortcomings of available data**

DHSS recognizes the shortcomings of the August data and is in the process of obtaining additional information.

DHSS did not assume in the original report that all sanction months were consecutive. In fact, there is no validity to the later analysis that sanctions must be consecutive followed by months of no sanction for Learnfare to be having an impact. If a teen with poor prior attendance improves attendance

sufficiently to only be sanctioned in three or fewer months while being subject to Learnfare for the entire school year, then Learnfare has had a positive impact. As mentioned elsewhere in the article, the real benefit of Learnfare may be that teens improve their attendance without first being penalized.

The subsequent “analysis” done in September by a DHSS staff person included as many or more shortcomings as the original summary. These will be avoided in the report that is now being prepared. As just one example, the September analysis is limited to the first month a teen is sanctioned and the third month after that. This means that a teen who is subject to the monthly attendance requirements for the entire school year, but is not sanctioned until one of the last three months of the school year, is not considered in the analysis. This teen certainly has improved attendance and should not be exempted from any analysis. In addition, a teen who was in school and subject to Learnfare attendance requirements for the entire school year, but was sanctioned only in December and March, would be considered a teen who was “still not in school” after three months. In fact, this analysis has removed many teens who improved their attendance under Learnfare, yet it still shows that 54 percent of sanctioned teens improved attendance and were sanctioned for three or fewer months. It is invalid to assume that sanction months must be consecutive, followed by months of no sanction, for Learnfare to be having a positive impact.

Our experience over the first full year of Learnfare leads us to believe that Learnfare has made an impact on helping to get teens to return to school or improve attendance. We realize that Learnfare may not be the only motivator to get some of the teens to return. Learnfare was combined together with other programs such as the Children-at-Risk program and the new truancy and compulsory attendance laws to help ensure that teens get the education they need to be productive adults.

#### **Sanctions at the end of the school year**

The article indicates that sanctions were higher near the end of the school year. While school districts have indicated that attendance declines in spring owing to spring fever, there is another more significant contributor to this increase in sanctions that should be pointed out. Late in the 1988–89 school year, Milwaukee County reviewed cases with a teenager to assure that they were properly coded for Learnfare. In this process they identified several teens who had poor prior attendance but had not been properly coded for monthly monitoring. The addition of these individuals to the Learnfare monthly attendance requirement resulted in an increase in the number of teens sanctioned.

#### **Objections to specific statements**

##### **“Strict attendance standards”**

We do not believe this is an accurate description of the Learnfare attendance requirements; they are far from strict.

Program requirements are based on “Children-at-Risk” legislation, but whereas “at risk” legislation counts *all* absences, Learnfare counts only unexcused absences. Under Learnfare, the teen is allowed two full days of unexcused absences each month without penalty. Additionally, partial-day absences and those absences for which an excuse is provided are not considered at all in the Learnfare requirements.

#### **“Lack of a rigorous experimental evaluation”**

The article states that federal officials are “not requiring a rigorous experimental evaluation.” This is inaccurate; a rigorous evaluation for Learnfare is required just as for other waivers. Federal officials have reviewed and approved all steps of the evaluation, including the RFP (Request for Proposals), the evaluation proposal selected, the contract with the Employment and Training Institute of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and the draft research design. The Low Income Opportunity Board, while requiring rigorous evaluations for all demonstrations, has agreed that control groups are not necessary in all instances to accomplish a meaningful evaluation.

We are late in signing the ETI evaluation contract because of the numerous steps we were required to take in getting federal review and approval for the evaluation. We are very anxious to begin the evaluation.

#### **The role of the governor**

The Governor’s veto did not remove the provisions to make child care available and refer children to the “At Risk” program. The 1987–89 budget bill included funding specifically for child care and transportation for Learnfare teens. It was always the intent that teen parents would be exempt from Learnfare if regulated child care was not available. The Governor’s veto did not affect this. Also, referral to the Children-at-Risk program was a part of the original Learnfare planning process that was not eliminated by the Governor’s veto.

#### **“The state will save money by invoking sanctions”**

The intent of Learnfare was never to save money through sanctions. Any “savings” from sanctions are more than offset by costs for day care, transportation, and funding for alternative education. The only money the program intends to save is welfare benefits in future years by having teens on AFDC get a high school education so they can be productive adults and not be dependent on our programs in the future.

#### **“Virtually all of the issues raised at the beginning of the program remain today”**

This is an incorrect statement. Many of the issues have already been addressed; others will be addressed as we work on expansion of the program.

## **Comment on questions raised about Learnfare**

### **What will it accomplish?**

The article indicates that the current program avoids service intervention. This is not the case. The current program provides service interventions through funding for day care, transportation, and alternative education. Outreach and case-management services are provided in some counties through funding included in Income Maintenance Administration, the JOBS program, and additional funding that we have put into Milwaukee County specifically for Learnfare. Some counties have also contributed their own dollars to provide Learnfare service interventions.

### **Is it fair?**

The article indicates a wide variety of local attitudes. We have found that most local staff statewide are in favor of the Learnfare program. We are aware of only one school district in the state that does not fully support it. County social services have also been supportive.

### **Is there due process?**

The Learnfare program certainly provides for due process as required under the law and our federal waiver. This was addressed in the decision to dismiss all claims included in the Learnfare law suit. While the current program provides ample opportunity for families to present good cause and avoid or reverse sanctions, the expanded program will greatly enhance this opportunity through the case-management component.

### **Are there unknown impacts on families and schools?**

It should be pointed out in the article that all of the issues raised are being addressed in the evaluation we have contracted for. It continues to concern me that an argument we hear against Learnfare is that these Learnfare teens might adversely affect the general learning environment in some classes. Schools are required by law to teach all children. If regular school programs do not meet the needs of the students, thus causing them to be disruptive, schools must provide appropriate programs to meet their needs. This is one of the primary purposes of the Children-at-Risk legislation. This certainly is not a reason for allowing children not to attend school and get a high school education.

### **Are there continuing administrative difficulties?**

It is important that the article point out where the administrative difficulties occurred and the numerous changes that have been made to address the difficulties that were encountered. Problems were almost exclusively in Milwaukee County. To address these, several things were done in addition to the monthly coordination meetings. The first step was adding the Learnfare Hotline in Milwaukee County DSS and including the phone number of the Hotline on all Learnfare

negative notices. We have recently added staff to the Hotline and will also be funding staff at MPS specifically to address Learnfare administrative difficulties. As I mentioned earlier, all staff will help to assure the accuracy of Learnfare attendance information and sanctions. In addition, late in the 1988-89 school year MPS instituted an internal reverification process for all teens potentially subject to Learnfare sanctions. For any individual identified in the monthly match as having more than two unexcused absences in the month, the school attendance officer must reverify that the number of reported absences is correct and that the absences were in fact unexcused. If any errors in the original information are found, the information is reported to the county prior to the effective date of the sanction, and the sanction is reversed if appropriate. MPS has also conducted training of school personnel so they understand the Learnfare program and the importance of providing correct attendance information. All of these changes, along with the continuing cooperation and collaboration of the various agencies involved, have done a great deal to reduce or eliminate any errors that were occurring. Any remaining administrative issues, such as deer hunting being excused in one part of the state and not another, are being addressed as we look at expansion of the program.

## **Conclusion**

The article states that Learnfare has proven only that sanctions can be imposed on the school-aged welfare population on a large scale. We disagree strongly with this conclusion. We believe that Learnfare has also shown that some teens will return to school or improve attendance at least in part because of a program like Learnfare. While we can't tell the exact number of teens who returned to school or improved attendance, or if Learnfare was the only reason for this change, there is no question that Learnfare has already had a positive impact on helping teens in Wisconsin get a high school education. We further believe that by expanding Learnfare as proposed, there will be an even greater impact by preventing problems at an early age and helping these kids get on the right track before they fall behind and drop out of school. ■

### **Joseph Pechman 1918-1989**

Dr. Joseph Pechman served on the National Advisory Committee of the Institute for Research on Poverty from 1975 until 1988. His counsel helped guide the Institute through a period when federal funding priorities shifted away from questions related to poverty in America. During that time he urged that national attention continue to be given to the nature, causes, and consequences of poverty, and he provided strong support for the work of IRP.

Drawing on his special knowledge of the distribution of income, the actual and potential effects of taxation, and the nature of income inequality in the United States, Dr. Pechman made important contributions to the discussions of the Advisory Committee, which in turn helped shape the Institute's research agenda.

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# Workshop Announcements

## IRP summer workshop, 1990

Applications are invited for participation in a research workshop on the theme "Labor Market Prospects for the Disadvantaged," to be held at the Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison, tentatively scheduled for June 25-29, 1990. Designed to build a community of research interest around this and related topics concerning the low-income population, the workshop will gather approximately 40 junior and senior researchers for formal and informal discussions over the course of the week. Junior researchers are especially encouraged to apply. The workshop is intended to focus on the application of methods on the frontier of empirical analysis, and papers using such methods will be presented at morning and afternoon sessions. The workshop is being organized by Robert Moffitt, in collaboration with Charles F. Manski and Robert D. Mare. Participants will be drawn from the disciplines of economics, demography, and sociology. Limited funds are available for travel and lodging. Selection of participants will be announced by the end of April 1990.

Prospective participants should submit a curriculum vitae and a statement of research interest in the theme. If the applicant wishes to present a paper, an abstract should be included in the submission.

Applications must be received by March 15, 1990, at the Institute for Research on Poverty, 3412 Social Science Building, 1180 Observatory Drive, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706. Contact person: Elizabeth Evanson (608-262-6574).

## Luxembourg Income Study summer workshop

The Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) has made comparable over twenty large microdata sets that contain comprehensive measures of income and economic well-being for a set of modern industrialized welfare states. The LIS databank currently covers eleven countries for 1979-82—Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Datasets for 1985-87 will be in place by spring 1990. The new datasets will cover most of the previously mentioned countries and Italy, Poland, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Finland as well.

The LIS Summer Workshop is a two-week pre- and post-doctoral workshop designed to introduce young scholars in the social sciences to comparative research in income distribution and social policy using the LIS database. The 1988 and 1989 workshops attracted over 50 attendees from 18 countries. The third workshop will be held July 15-27, 1990, in Luxembourg. The cost will be 36,000 Belgian francs (about \$950), which includes tuition, local travel, and full board. International transportation is not included. Students are expected to be subsidized by home countries, national and international research foundations, universities, and other sources, including at least two special scholarships from the Ford Foundation LIS Development Initiatives Fund. The language of instruction will be English. The course of study will include a mix of lectures and assistance/direction using the LIS database to explore a research issue chosen by the participant. Faculty are expected to include Anthony B. Atkinson (UK), Aldi J. M. Hagenaars (Netherlands), Richard Hauser (Germany), Cristof Starzec (France), Frank Cowell (UK), Stephen Jenkins (UK), Shelly Phipps (Canada), Colin Gillion (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]), Michael O'Higgins (OECD), Peter Gottschalk (USA), and Jan Eivind Kolberg (Norway).

Additional information, including application forms, is available from Timothy Smeeding, LIS Project Director (VIPPS, 1208 18th Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37212, USA); Lee Rainwater, LIS Research Director (Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA); or Caroline de Tombeur (LIS at CEPS/INSTEAD, B.P. #65, L-7201 Walferdange, Luxembourg). Applications are due by May 1, 1990.

# Birth weights and the geography of poverty

by Katherine O'Regan and Michael Wiseman

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Katherine O'Regan is a graduate student in the Department of Economics, University of California at Berkeley. Michael Wiseman is a professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning and at the La Follette Institute of Public Affairs, and an affiliate at the Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison. A more detailed discussion of this subject can be found in O'Regan and Wiseman, "Using Birth Weights to Chart the Spatial Distribution of Urban Poverty," *Urban Geography*, forthcoming.

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In the past, efforts to understand and alleviate poverty have focused on its incidence and persistence among all households, without reference to the location of these households. For this work the traditional tools for the study of poverty have sufficed. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), for example, collects data on individual and household characteristics over time, but the only geographical information it provides is a code for county and state.<sup>1</sup> Recent explorations of poverty in urban ghettos, however, have led many to believe that where a family lives matters—that the prospects for leaving poverty are in part influenced by the neighborhood and its social environment. If this hypothesis is to be tested, poverty researchers must find means to describe the neighborhoods in which the poor live and to measure what it is about these areas that affects the ability of the poor to better their lives.

Most current work on the geography of urban poverty is based on study of the incidence of poverty by census tract. Tracts, according to the Bureau of the Census, are "small, relatively permanent areas into which standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSA's) and certain other areas are divided for the purpose of providing statistics for small areas. When census tracts are established, they are designed to be homogeneous insofar as is reasonable, with respect to population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions. Tracts generally have between 2,500 and 8,000 residents."<sup>2</sup>

Tract-based data have a number of shortcomings as a basis for studying the relationship between poverty and location.

In the first place, the census is taken only once a decade. Comparison of the 1970 and 1980 censuses indicates that in some cities neighborhoods are changing rapidly.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to derive an understanding of the dynamics of neighborhood change from a once-in-a-decade glimpse. And because tracts are established on the basis of population size and not area, and once established, tracts are rarely changed, tracts in old cities are very different from tracts in younger ones. They tend to be smaller and, because population in the poverty areas of older cities has often declined more than that of inner-city areas of new cities, to have smaller populations. As a result, comparisons across city types drawn on the basis of tract data reflect to an unknown extent simply differences in the grid imposed by the tract maps. Third, while census tracts may make a convenient proxy for neighborhood, a household located near a tract boundary is presumably affected by tract characteristics on both sides of the line. In such a circumstance the characteristics of the tract in which the household falls may not reflect what is going on in its proximity. Few studies of the geography of poverty account both for immediate tract characteristics and circumstances in tracts close enough to have spillover effects.

If census data have shortcomings for research on urban poverty, they are even more inadequate for determining local poverty policy. As long as national policy proposals emphasized innovations in income maintenance, to be applied irrespective of location, census data and census-type surveys such as the Current Population Survey were appropriate. But more recent policy proposals have emphasized local innovation and political action. Census-based data are outdated and generally too coarse for informing community planning and action. Nor can they be much refined. Information on locale is restricted by the need for the Bureau of the Census to protect the confidentiality of all material it obtains. To meet the needs of both research and policy, therefore, we believe it is essential to develop supplements to the census.

## Institutional data to supplement the census

Institutional records—data on individuals and households that are collected in conjunction with existing public programs, are, in our opinion, the most promising means for

supplementing the census. Many such data exist in every large metropolitan area. Mailing addresses for recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, for example, and records of housing subsidies and unemployment compensation pinpoint the locations of welfare recipients and the unemployed. Police incident reports include addresses that can be used to chart the location of the victimization that is so much a part of the lives of the urban poor. Health records can be used to plot the incidence of health problems associated with low-income status.

In this article we illustrate the use of institutional data by studying the changing incidence of babies with low birth weights across neighborhoods in Oakland, California. Our analysis is based on the assumption that low birth weights are an indication of social distress. First we analyze the census tracts of Oakland to determine, using a variety of definitions, which can be classified as “underclass” neighborhoods. “Underclass” is subject to a variety of interpretations. We use the term simply to refer to nonelderly adults who have a low probability of moving through legitimate means to self-support. “Underclass areas” are neighborhoods with an exceptional concentration of underclass persons. We then impose our geographical map of rates of low birth weights on these neighborhoods to see to what extent they match. If the geographical distribution of low birth weights, as well as other family-related events detectable with institutional data, can shed light on the geography of poverty, we can use such data to chart the changing locales of poverty since the 1980 census. Such information is essential both as a basis for understanding the dynamics of poverty concentration and for planning and execution of neighborhood-based poverty policy. Despite the reservations cited above, we use tract information. But as will be seen below, we pay special attention to developments in areas adjacent to tracts with significant poverty concentration.

## Poverty and birth weights

On the birth certificate of each infant born in the United States is the child’s birth weight in grams. Although much of the information on birth certificates is confidential, county health departments in many areas regularly tabulate births by certain characteristics, including weight, race, and, at least in Oakland, California, the census tract of the mother’s residence. By pediatric convention, a birth weight below 2,500 grams (about 5.47 lbs.) is considered to place the infant at exceptional health risk.<sup>4</sup>

Poverty and low birth weights are linked for a number of reasons: households with low incomes may not be able to afford adequate prenatal health care;<sup>5</sup> health care that is available may be of lower quality; the nutritional intake of low-income mothers is poorer than that of more affluent mothers; poor mothers probably have less information about prenatal care; and finally, poor people in general are in

poorer health than the more well-to-do, so it is reasonable to assume that their babies will be less robust than those born to healthier women.

Empirical studies have demonstrated a correlation between various socioeconomic characteristics and low birth weights.<sup>6</sup> The incidence of low birth weight is greater, for example, among births to unmarried women, women of low socioeconomic status (as measured by education), and teenagers. These are the groups at substantial risk of persistent poverty and, if they live in urban ghettos, inclusion in the underclass. Race is closely associated with the incidence of low birth weights: black infants are more than twice as likely to be underweight as are whites.

Obviously the incidence of low birth weights can be altered by health and nutrition services. Changes in the availability of such services may reduce the incidence of low birth weights independent of other neighborhood developments. There is little evidence of significant variation in service levels in Oakland over the period studied here.<sup>7</sup> We therefore assume that changes in the incidence of low birth weights are the consequence of changes in the general circumstances of the city’s low-income population.

## Defining poverty neighborhoods

The revival of interest in neighborhood effects on poverty coincides with the work on the underclass of William Julius Wilson and his colleagues at the University of Chicago.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent empirical work by Erol Ricketts and Isabel Sawhill classified census tracts as underclass on the basis of the proportion of families with children that are headed by women, the proportion of families receiving public assistance, the proportion of men not in the labor force, and the dropout rates for teenagers in high school.<sup>9</sup> Mark Hughes shifted discussion from people (the members of the ghetto underclass) to places (the impacted ghetto).<sup>10</sup> He defines tracts as “impacted” if levels of the factors used by Ricketts and Sawhill as underclass indicators exceed twice the median values for all tracts in the surrounding metropolitan areas. Thus impactedness is based on metropolitan rather than national standards. He then examines these tracts in relation to one another and with respect to the central business districts, and in relation to all tracts in a metropolitan area with substantial poverty populations. We follow Hughes’s methodology, with the awareness that the relative character of a neighborhood is not meaningful in studying the consequences of living in a neighborhood for its inhabitants. Eventually neighborhood conditions must be evaluated on absolute terms.

## Poverty neighborhoods in Oakland

Oakland is the third largest city in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 1988 its population was 350,000. It contains 104 census tracts. In 1984 the Association of Bay Area Govern-

ments published a study of Alameda County in which census data were used to define poor neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> The analysis was based on sixty-seven demographic and socioeconomic tract characteristics covering demographic variables (e.g., percentage of population under age 5); racial and ethnic variables (e.g., percentage black); household types (e.g., percentage of persons in family households); educational attainment (e.g., percentage of persons over age 25 who had not completed high school); income (e.g., mean family income); labor force involvement (e.g., percentage of persons age 16+ in the labor force); mobility and commuter patterns (e.g., percentage of households with no vehicle); and housing (e.g., rate of renter occupancy). Factor analysis was used to reduce the sixty-seven variables to nine variables that captured most of the variation in the data. Scores for each factor were computed for each of the 785 census tracts in the five-county area and then clustering techniques were employed to group all tracts into seven "social types." These included (1) most affluent areas; (2) recently developed areas; (3) average-income families; (4) areas of older population; (5) small households; (6) lower-income families; and (7) urban poverty.

The 41 tracts in the "urban poverty" category in Oakland manifest all of the characteristics associated with underclass areas in the literature. They also tend to be spatially clustered (with two exceptions) into two groups (see Figure 1). Using a different and simpler measure of poverty—a poverty rate of 30 percent or higher within a tract—we found 37 poor tracts, of which 31 were in the urban poverty category of the Association of Bay Area Governments.

### Low birth weights in poverty neighborhoods

Following standard health statistics convention, we define low-birth-weight rates as the percentage of the total births in a tract made up of infants weighing less than 2,500 grams. For all births during the years 1979–81, this rate was 12.2 percent within the poverty tracts and 7.7 elsewhere in Oakland. Given that the national low-birth-weight rate is 6.8 percent,<sup>12</sup> clearly the poverty tracts in Oakland exhibit exceptionally high rates.

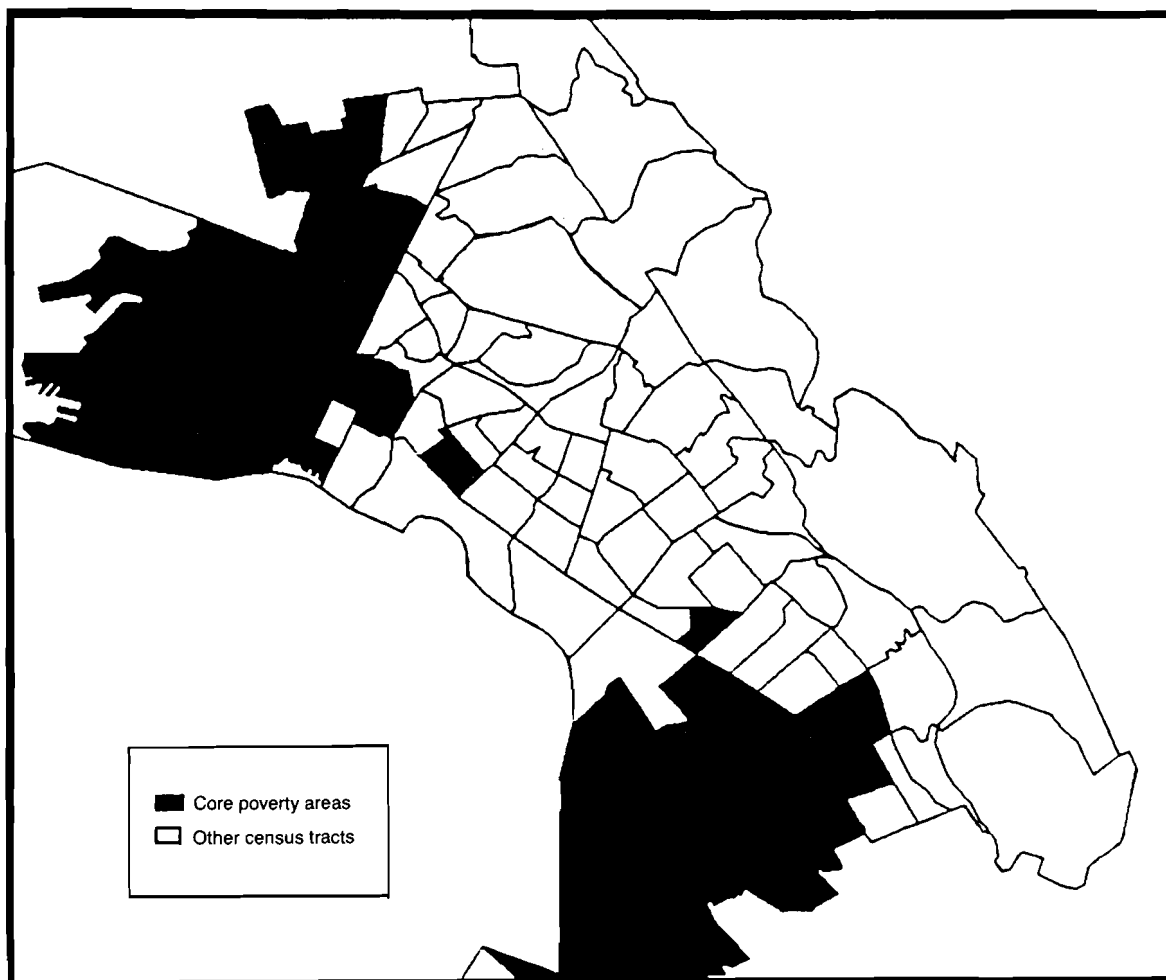


Figure 1. Oakland Poverty Areas Identified by Procedures of the Association of Bay Area Governments

We ranked census tracts by their low-birth-weight rates and designated the 39 tracts with the highest incidence of low birth weights as high poverty. Of this group 29 fell into the urban poverty cluster under the definition of the Association of Bay Area Governments and 25 were high poverty tracts using the criterion of 30 percent or more of the households with incomes below the poverty line. When we eliminated eighteen tracts with too few births to provide reliable estimates of the low-birth-weight rate, we found a correlation of .65 between tracts with over 30 percent poor and low-birth-weight rates, and a correlation of .72 between tracts with low-birth-weight rates and those classified as urban poverty. We feel that these correlations are close enough to enable us to use low-birth-weight rates to estimate changes in the boundaries of poverty areas over the time since the 1980 census.

### Estimating boundaries of poverty areas

We define boundaries of poverty areas in two ways. First, given the fact that analyses of poverty tracts show that they

tend to be contiguous,<sup>13</sup> we look at the situation in those tracts immediately adjacent to tracts designated as poverty areas in the study by the Association of Bay Area Governments. There were 26 tracts sharing a border or corner with this poverty area in 1980. We use the term “intermediate” for these tracts and “periphery” for the remaining Oakland tracts.

Our second approach to defining contiguity involves using the clustering procedure that was used to define the urban poverty tracts in the first place. We select the 26 tracts outside of the poverty areas with the highest scores on the poverty factor. This gives us two sets of tracts with features “intermediate” between those of the core and periphery areas: one set is defined by spatial contiguity with the core; the second by a contiguity in characteristics as measured by the poverty factor isolated in factor analysis.

There is of course overlap between the two groups of intermediate tracts. In Figure 2 we have redrawn the tract map of Oakland and identified five tract groups. The first, identi-

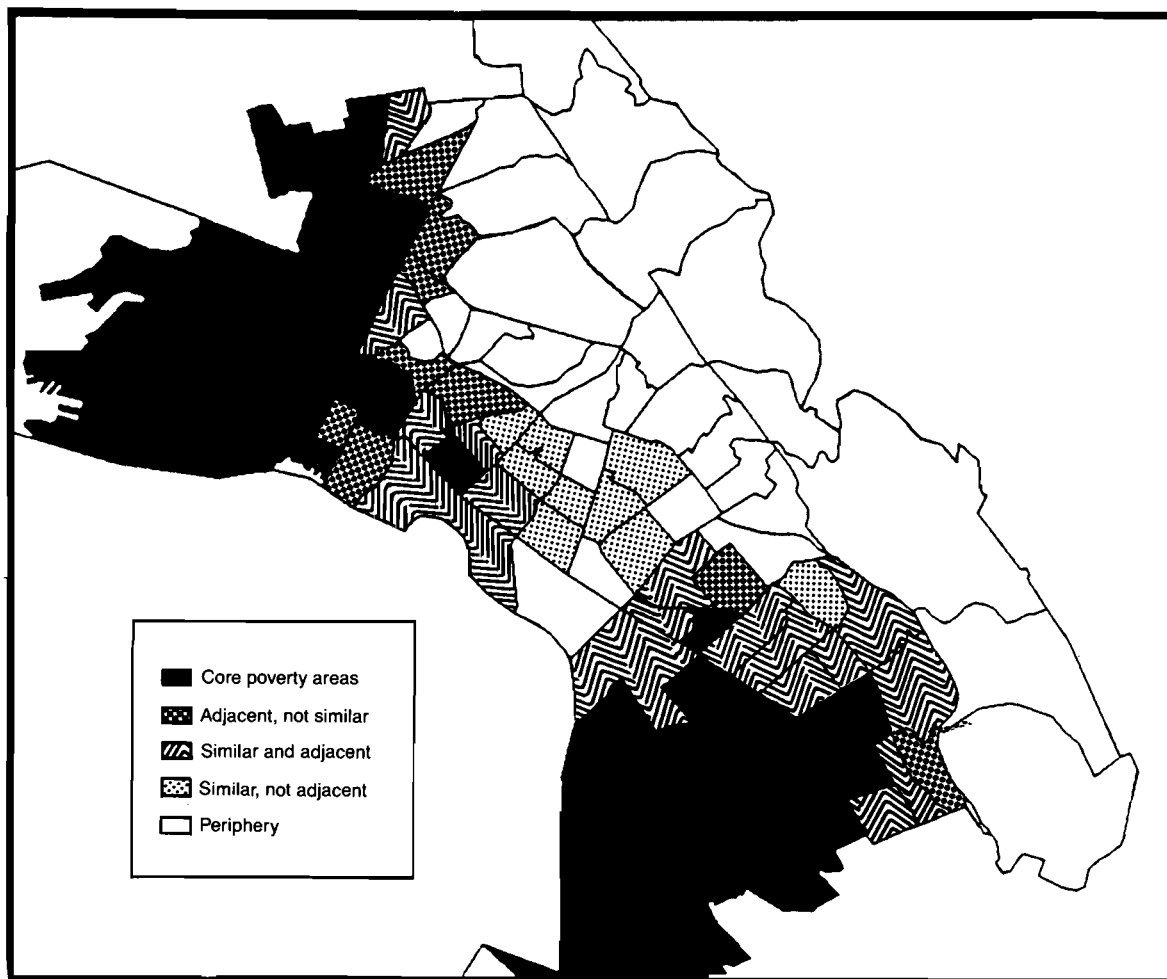


Figure 2. Tracts Peripheral to the Core Poverty Area Based on Adjacency and Similarity Definitions

fied by the solid pattern in the legend, is the urban poverty core. The second group is made up of those tracts that are geographically adjacent to the core but not "similar" to the poverty tracts, when similarity is judged by the factor analysis results. The third group of tracts is both adjacent and similar. Group four is made up of tracts with characteristics that are similar to the poverty tracts but which are not immediately adjacent to them. The last group is the residual: those tracts neither adjacent nor similar to the poverty core. Again, there are 41 tracts in the core. Of the remainder, 9 are adjacent but not similar, 17 are adjacent and similar, 9 are similar but not adjacent, and 28 lie in the periphery. We emphasize that the decision to identify precisely 26 tracts as adjacent in either sense is strictly ad hoc, and we will return to the general problem posed by the absence of theoretical guidance for such choices in our conclusions.

Table 1 reports low-birth-weight rates for 1979-81 and 1984-86 for the core identified by the Association of Bay Area Governments and for intermediate and peripheral tracts, using both the spatial contiguity and character similarity criteria for identifying intermediate tracts. Looking first at the 1979-81 data, the low-birth-weight rate declines as we move outward from the core. While the same progression persists five years later, the intermediate-zone low-birth-weight rate has moved closer to that of the core. In both cases, however, the rates beyond the intermediate zone have also increased. This result is not particularly sensitive to the definition of core poverty area employed; a similar figure which identifies the 30 percent poverty tracts as the core reveals the same progression from core to periphery and the same convergence of low-birth-weight rates over time. It does appear that tract characteristics rather than physical proximity provide a better definition both of zones and of

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tracts at risk: note the greater disparity between core and intermediate zones in the early period and the more pronounced intermediate zone change apparent in the data based on tract characteristics.

Here we run into a problem of interpretation that is discussed in several analyses of changes in the character of high-poverty tracts over time. The developments revealed by Table 1 need not be the result of a spreading of poverty. Rather, the central tracts could be emptying out and, as a result, women at risk of low-birth-weight deliveries may simply now be more likely to live in the adjacent tracts. If this were the case, the share of total births occurring in poverty areas would be decreasing, and the share in the intermediate tracts would be going up. In fact, no significant population shift has occurred; the proportions of births occurring in each area have remained virtually unchanged.

Oakland's racial composition is changing. Other things equal, if black infants are more at risk of low birth weights than infants from other groups (this issue is a matter of controversy), changes in this indicator may simply result from changing race composition of the population. While we doubt that such changes would be sufficient to explain the development apparent in Table 1, we are currently working with more disaggregated data to study low-birth-weight incidence among blacks alone.

**Comparing low birth weights to other indicators**

Table 1 indicates that conditions in what we have identified as intermediate tracts in Oakland have deteriorated since 1980. If low-birth-weight rates are markers for more com-

**Table 1**

**Low-Birth-Weight Rates by Area, Oakland, 1979-81 and 1984-86**

	No. of Tracts	Incidence of Low Birth Weight by Alternative Area Definition			
		Spatial Contiguity		Character Similarity	
		1979-81	1984-86	1979-81	1984-86
Core	41	12.2%	12.0%	12.2%	12.0%
Intermediate	26	9.1	10.2	8.8	10.4
Periphery	37	6.6	7.5	6.2	6.5

**Note:** Core areas are those tracts classified as "urban poverty." Intermediate areas are either adjacent to the core areas (spatial contiguity) or have the highest scores on the poverty factor outside of the core areas (character similarity). The remaining areas are the periphery.

plex developments, such changes should appear in other poverty-related data.

One of the harshest features of poverty concentration in older cities is the association of such concentration with crime. Indeed, as John DiIulio has forcefully pointed out,<sup>14</sup> such neighborhoods combine households which produce most street criminals with those who suffer the most as victims. If rising low-birth-weight rates reflect general deterioration in neighborhood conditions, the deterioration should show up in measures of criminal activity. Numerous studies have found a positive relationship between area poverty rates and crime rates.<sup>15</sup>

Because of reporting problems and the additional difficulty that crime reports in Oakland are available by beat but not census tract, we utilize Health Department data on deaths by homicide and by "police action."<sup>16</sup> Ideally we would like to count homicides where they occur, but the Health Department data are organized by residence of the deceased, not the place of death. We are, therefore, assuming that the number of one's neighbors who meet violent ends is an indicator of neighborhood character, regardless of where the deaths occurred.<sup>17</sup> We also assume that the propensity of the Oakland Police Department to dispatch persons through "police action" has not changed appreciably.

Table 2 shows deaths by homicide or police action as a share of all deaths in the core, intermediate, and peripheral areas of the city under both definition systems for 1979-81 and 1984-86. The results are consistent with what we discovered using birth data: over the first half of the decade of the 1980s, conditions in the intermediate areas deteriorated. But the

**Table 2**

**Share of "Homicide and Police Action" in Deaths  
by Area, Oakland, 1979-81 and 1984-86**

	No. of Tracts	Homicide/Police Action Share by Alternative Area Definition			
		Spatial Contiguity		Character Similarity	
		1979-81	1984-86	1979-81	1984-86
Core	41	3.6%	4.0%	3.6%	4.0%
Intermediate	26	2.7	3.5	3.4	3.8
Periphery	37	1.8	1.4	1.3	1.0

**Note:** Core areas are those tracts classified as "urban poverty." Intermediate areas are either adjacent to the core areas (spatial contiguity) or have the highest scores on the poverty factor outside of the core areas (character similarity). The remaining areas are the periphery.

message of the homicide data differs somewhat from the results for birth weight. Here the identification of intermediate tracts on the basis of spatial contiguity seems to produce a sharper contrast between core and intermediate areas in 1979-81 and a more dramatic change between periods than is apparent when the similarity-of-character criterion is used. Also, conditions in the core itself have deteriorated. This suggests that changes in homicide incidence may be driven by factors that differ from those identifying neighborhoods with exceptional incidence of low birth weights. As was true for the birth weights data, additional normalization is needed before we can draw more substantial conclusions. Total deaths in a tract are in part a function of the age distribution of the population, and there is no reason to believe this is the same for core and intermediate areas. It would be useful to study the sensitivity of the results to adjustments for age distribution once the results of the 1990 census are available.

## Conclusions

Broadly speaking, we can distinguish three objectives in research on the spatial dimension of urban poverty: (1) developing and testing models of the consequences of neighborhood for the persistence of poverty; (2) modeling the social and economic processes that produce the conditions that are expected to generate neighborhood effects; and (3) explaining the location or geography of the neighborhoods those social and economic processes create. Progress on any of these fronts requires much more building on the theoretical foundation laid by Wilson and his colleagues in each of these areas.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the importance of theoretical development, this paper has focused on empirical opportunities. We have argued that progress on all three fronts requires information with finer spatial identification and more frequent observation than is possible using census data. Institutional data provide opportunities for study of the spatial development of poverty, offering in some cases both more precision geographically and more frequent reporting. Our results confirm for Oakland what those who work with census data have suspected for many cities: Important changes have occurred in the geography of poverty in that city since the 1980 census. In particular, it appears that areas of poverty are spreading, and that changes in the spatial incidence of low birth weights are associated with changes in the spatial incidence of another indicator of neighborhood deterioration, the share of deaths attributable to homicide.

Although our results underscore the ad hoc character of most of the empirical research on the geography of poverty, we believe that in studying the geographic evolution of poverty, there is more to work with than the census. ■

*(Notes on following page)*

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, *A Panel Study of Income Dynamics: Procedures and Tape Codes (Documentation), 1985 Interviewing Year* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, 1988), pp. 104, 701. Work is now under way to merge PSID observations with data on certain characteristics of the census tracts in which the surveyed households are found.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population and Housing, Census Tracts, United States Summary* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), Appendix A, p. A.1.

<sup>3</sup>Erol R. Ricketts and Ronald B. Mincy, "Growth of the Underclass, 1970-1980," *Journal of Human Resources*, 25 (1990), forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup>Helen Chase and M. A. Byrnes, "Trends in 'Prematurity,' United States, 1950-67," *Vital and Health Statistics*, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Publication No. 72-2030 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972).

<sup>5</sup>S. D. Singh, D. Torres, and J. D. Forrest, "The Need for Prenatal Care in the United States: Evidence from the 1980 National Natality Survey," *Family Planning Perspectives*, 17 (1985), 122-123.

<sup>6</sup>For summaries of this work, see Selma Taffel, *Factors Associated with Low Birth Weight, United States, 1976*, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital and Health Statistics, Series 21, No. 33, 1980*; Helen Chase, *Trends in Low Birth Weight Ratios, United States and Each State 1950-1968* (Rockville, Md.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973); and Mark Rosenzweig and Paul Schultz, "The Behavior of Mothers as Inputs to Child Health: The Determinants of Birth Weight, Gestation, and Rate of Fetal Growth," in *Economic Aspects of Health*, ed. Victor Fuchs (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1982).

<sup>7</sup>There is some evidence that use of medical care by pregnant women declined nationwide in the early 1980s. See U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, *Background Material and Data on Programs within the Jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), p. 841. A positive change in the level of services available to mothers in Oakland occurred in 1979, when a local health care initiative increased services in an attempt to deal with the problem of low birth weights. See Urban Strategies Council, *A Chance for Every Child: Oakland's Infants, Children, and Youth at Risk of Persistent Poverty* (Oakland, Calif.: Urban Strategies Council, 1988), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Wilson and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "Poverty, Joblessness, and the Social Transformation of the Inner City," in *Welfare Policy for the 1990s*, ed. Phoebe H. Cottingham and David T. Ellwood (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup>Erol R. Ricketts and Isabel V. Sawhill, "Defining and Measuring the Underclass," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 7 (1988), 316-325. For a discussion of the state of measurement and definition of the underclass, see *Focus*, 12:1 (Spring and Summer 1989).

<sup>10</sup>See Mark Alan Hughes, "Misspeaking Truth to Power: A Geographical Perspective on the Underclass Fallacy," forthcoming in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*; and "Concentrated Deviance and the 'Underclass' Hypothesis," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 8 (1989), 274-281.

<sup>11</sup>See Association of Bay Area Governments, *Alameda County Social Area Analysis* (Oakland: ABAG, 1984).

<sup>12</sup>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1986*, Volume I, *Natality* (Hyattsville, Md.: National Center for Health Statistics, 1988), p. 91.

<sup>13</sup>See Hughes, "Misspeaking Truth to Power," and the Association of Bay Area Governments, *Alameda County Social Area Analysis*.

<sup>14</sup>John J. DiIulio, Jr., "The Impact of Inner-City Crime," *The Public Interest*, No. 96 (1989), pp. 28-46.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Richard Quinney, "Structural Characteristics, Population Areas, and Crime Rates in the United States," *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science*, 57 (1966), 45-52; Lynn A. Curtis, *Criminal Violence* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1974); and K. D. Harries, *Crime and the Environment* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1980). There is some debate over whether it is the absolute poverty level or some measure of relative poverty which is relevant; for reviews see Judith R. Blau and Peter M. Blau, "The Cost of Inequality: Metropolitan Structure and Violent Crime," *American Sociological Review*, 47 (1982), 114-129; and S. Messner, "Regional and Racial Effects on the Urban Homicide Rate: The Subculture of Violence Revisited," *American Journal of Sociology*, 88 (1983), 997-1007.

<sup>16</sup>We are grateful to Sally Howlett, Director of Information Systems for the Alameda County Health Care Services Agency, for making these data available to us.

<sup>17</sup>Empirical work focused strictly on homicide rates has also found a positive association between poverty and homicides. See Colin Loftin and Robert H. Hill, "Regional Subculture and Homicide," *American Sociological Review*, 39 (1974), 714-724; Robert Nash Parker and M. Dwayne Smith, "Deterrence, Poverty, and Type of Homicide," *American Journal of Sociology*, 85 (1979), 614-624; William C. Bailey, "Poverty, Inequality, and City Homicide Rates: Some Not So Unexpected Findings," *Criminology*, 22 (1984), 531-550; and Kirk R. Williams, "Economic Sources of Homicide: Reestimating the Effects of Poverty and Inequality," *American Sociological Review*, 49 (1984), 283-289.

<sup>18</sup>See note 8.

# Why are child support collections declining?

Between 1978 and 1985 total child support collections—payments made by absent parents to the custodians of their children—declined by 7 percent, from \$8.2 billion to \$7.6 billion (in 1987 dollars), and child support and alimony as a percentage of the total income received by female-headed families declined by 8 percent.<sup>1</sup> This decline was occurring at a time when more and more was being done on both the national and state level to require parents who do not live with their children to make regular support payments. Institute affiliate Philip K. Robins has examined this anomaly and the various hypotheses that have been advanced to explain it, and he and other affiliates have assessed the potential for child support to improve the circumstances of children (see box, page 25).

## History of enforcement of child support

For the past four decades, ever since it became abundantly clear that absent parents were contributing little to the support of their children—and, partly as a result, children living with single mothers were likely to be poor and dependent on welfare—government resources devoted to enforcing child support have grown steadily, until, by 1988, the cost of administering the enforcement program was \$1.2 billion and collections from the program amounted to approximately \$4.6 billion.<sup>2</sup> Enforcement has had the dual purposes of enhancing the well-being of children and reducing public expenditures on welfare. An abbreviated chronology of the federal government's accelerating commitment to the enforcement of child support through amendments of the Social Security Act follows.

1950—State welfare agencies are required to notify law enforcement officials when a child receiving AFDC benefits had been deserted or abandoned.

1965—States are allowed to request addresses of absent parents from federal social security records and tax records.

1967—States are required to establish a single organizational unit to enforce child support.

1975—Part D is added to Title IV of the Social Security Act, establishing the Child Support Enforcement (IV-D)

program. This legislation establishes a federal Office of Child Support Enforcement and requires each state to establish a corresponding agency to help enforce the payment of child support in all AFDC cases. Most of the states' enforcement costs are to be reimbursed by the federal government. The state agency must provide services to establish paternity, locate absent parents, establish child support obligations and enforce them. These services are to be made available on a temporary basis to non-AFDC families who request them. AFDC families are required to assign their rights to child support to the IV-D agency in order to receive welfare.

1980—Congress permanently extends matching funds for enforcement services to all children potentially eligible for child support, irrespective of income or AFDC reciprocity.

1981—A tax refund offset program authorizes the IRS to withhold refunds of persons who owe child support payments to families receiving AFDC benefits.<sup>3</sup> States are required to intercept payments of unemployment compensation to individuals whose child support payments to families receiving IV-D services are in arrears.

1984—States are required to adopt expedited procedures for obtaining and enforcing support orders either through the judicial system or under administrative procedures. Mandatory wage withholding is authorized if child support payments are delinquent by one month or more. The tax refund offset program is extended to families not on AFDC. States are required to develop guidelines for determining the size of child support awards. The length of time during which paternity can be established is extended to the child's eighteenth birthday. A \$50 child support "passthrough" enables families on AFDC to keep the first \$50 of child support paid, after which their AFDC payments are reduced dollar-for-dollar by the amount paid.

1988—States are required to use guidelines (uniform standards) for determining the size of child support awards unless the guidelines are rebutted by a written finding that applying them would be unjust or inappropriate in a specific case. States must review individual child support awards for AFDC cases at regular intervals, and all other

IV-D cases at the request of a parent. Starting in 1990, states will be required to use immediate withholding for all cases handled by the Office of Child Support Enforcement. By 1994 withholding will be required for all new support orders. States are required to establish paternity in a given proportion of cases of out-of-wedlock births that result in AFDC or IV-D services. Incentives are provided for the states to set up procedures to require that genetic testing be used in contested paternity cases. Furthermore the social security numbers of both parents are to be put on every birth certificate, to be available to the IV-D agency if needed. Greater efforts will also be made to locate missing parents, especially those who have moved to a different state.

### Likely causes of the decline in award amounts

Table 1 presents data on the basic trends in child support from 1978 to 1985 for women age 18 and older. As can be seen, there is a slight upward trend in child support award rates (the proportion of families eligible for awards who obtain them) and reciprocity rates (the proportion of those with awards who receive support payments). Yet the mean award and mean payment drop. From 1978 to 1985 the average child support award fell by almost 25 percent in real terms and the average payment fell by roughly the same amount. The biggest decline occurred between 1978 and 1981, when the average award fell by 14 percent and the average payment fell by almost 19 percent. Because the intensified efforts of government are assumed to have had the effect of increasing both the sizes of awards and the total amount collected, something else was obviously happening concurrently to cause the drop.

Three possible explanations of the decline are examined by Robins: inflation, demographic change, and the increased earnings of women.

#### Inflation

Because child support awards are almost always made in dollar amounts rather than as percentages of the noncustodial parent's income, and because awards are rarely updated (though updating is mandated by the latest legislation), inflation is bound to reduce the real value of awards over time. The high inflation rate of the period from 1978 through 1981 undoubtedly played a major role in the decrease in the average real awards during this period, but from 1981 to 1985 inflation was considerably more moderate, yet the award level continued to decline. Therefore it is unlikely that inflation alone explains the decrease in the average size of awards.

#### Change in the demographic composition of those receiving awards

In recent years the number of never-married women awarded child support has increased. These women tend to have

**Table 1**  
**Trends in Child Support, 1978-1985**

	1978	1981	1983	1985
Overall potential population (N=14,099)				
Award rate	.52	.52	.50	.53
Reciprocity rate	.37	.37	.38	.39
Sample size	3,082	3,711	3,686	3,620
Population owed child support (N=7,265)				
Reciprocity rate	.72	.71	.75	.74
Mean award	\$3,326	\$2,855	\$2,679	\$2,515
Mean payment	\$2,195	\$1,779	\$1,850	\$1,681
Sample size	1,590	1,918	1,852	1,905
Population receiving child support (N=5,312)				
Mean payment	\$3,039	\$2,491	\$2,472	\$2,275
Sample size	1,148	1,370	1,386	1,408

**Source:** Philip K. Robins, "Why Are Child Support Award Amounts Declining?" IRP Discussion Paper No. 885-89, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1989, p. 7.

**Notes:** Based on data from March/April CPS match files. All amounts are in 1985 dollars, using the Consumer Price Index. Includes women age 18 and older.

lower awards than the rest of the population because the fathers of their children are younger and have lower incomes. They therefore bring down the average size of awards. But by how much? Between 1981 and 1985, among women with awards, the proportion that were never married rose from 4 percent to 7 percent.<sup>4</sup> By 1985 18.4 percent of never-married mothers potentially eligible for child support had awards.<sup>5</sup> Their awards averaged about one-half of those of other women. But because they are such a small part of the population of women receiving awards, it would be surprising if their presence could explain much of the drop in average awards. And the fact that more never-married mothers are receiving awards makes the drop in aggregate award levels even more surprising.

#### Earnings of the mother relative to earnings of father

It is not known to what extent the earnings of both the mother and the father have been used to determine the size of the child support award. Awards tend to increase with the earnings of the father and decrease with the earnings of the mother.<sup>6</sup> Moreover many or perhaps most individuals (but not all) believe that it is only fair to take the mother's income into account in determining the award.<sup>7</sup> As of 1989, a summary of the guidelines now in use lists 27 states that explicitly take into account the earnings of the mother as well as

the father.<sup>8</sup> Women's earnings relative to men rose over the period from 1978 to 1985 for two reasons: more and more women were working, and women's wages compared to those of men were gradually increasing.<sup>9</sup> This combination of circumstances makes women's earnings one of the most probable causes of the decline in child support collections.

### Estimating the effects of the proposed causes of the decline in awards

Using data from the March Current Population Surveys merged with special April Child Support Supplements, Robins was able to isolate the effects that inflation, demographics, women's earnings relative to those of men, and the government's stepped-up enforcement policy have had on child support awards over the period between 1978 and 1985. His results are given in Table 2. The table presents estimates of the sources of change in award levels for the total seven-year period and for shorter time spans within that period.

Over the full seven years, the increase in the relative earnings of women appears to have been the most important determinant of the decline in award size, accounting for \$725 of the \$811 drop. Inflation was chiefly responsible for the decline between 1978 and 1981, but thereafter the effect of inflation was positive, reflecting that the average rate of inflation experienced by sample members fell—because persons who obtained awards before the 1980–81 inflation aged out of the sample while persons with awards in later years entered it. Between 1983 and 1985 several offsetting factors were apparently at work: the increased number of never-married mothers with awards and the increased relative earnings of women led to a \$526 decline in the average award, whereas reduced inflation and the government's enforcement policies led to a \$361 increase in awards. The net result was a decline of \$164.

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### New Institute Publications on Child Support Awards

Irwin Garfinkel and Sara McLanahan, "The Effects of the Child Support Provisions of the Family Support Act of 1988 on Child Well-Being." IRP Discussion Paper No. 901–89, 1989.

Irwin Garfinkel and Marygold S. Melli, "The Use of Normative Standards in Family Law Decisions: Developing Mathematical Standards for Child Support." IRP Discussion Paper No. 900–89, forthcoming.

Charles Michalopoulos and Irwin Garfinkel, "Reducing the Welfare Dependence and Poverty of Single Mothers by Means of Earnings and Child Support: Wishful Thinking and Realistic Possibility." IRP Discussion Paper No. 882–89.

Ann Nichols-Casebolt and Marieka Klawitter, "Child Support Enforcement Reform: Can It Reduce the Welfare Dependency of Families of Never-Married Mothers?" IRP Discussion Paper No. 895–89, 1989.

Donald T. Oellerich, Irwin Garfinkel, and Philip K. Robins, "Private Child Support: Current and Potential Impacts." IRP Discussion Paper No. 888–89, 1989.

Philip K. Robins, "Why Are Child Support Award Amounts Declining?" IRP Discussion Paper No. 885–89, 1989.

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**Table 2**  
Estimated Sources of Changes in Average Award Levels

Period	Actual Change	Estimated Source of Change			
		Inflation	Demographic Factors	Female-Male Relative Earnings	Exposure to IV-D Program at Time of Marital Disruption
1978–1985	–\$811	–\$145	–\$103	–\$725	+\$162
1978–1981	–471	–318	+29	–254	+72
1981–1985	–340	+401	–210	–638	+106
1981–1983	–176	+136	–66	–293	+48
1983–1985	–164	+299	–140	–386	+62

Source: Philip K. Robins, "Why Are Child Support Award Amounts Declining?" IRP Discussion Paper No. 885–89, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1989, p. 24.

## Have child support awards topped off?

Because the Family Support Act (the 1988 amendments to the Social Security Act) requires states to use uniform standards to determine child support amounts, requires that child support be withheld from salaries, and provides incentives for states to pursue cases in which paternity has not been established (as well as penalties if states fail to comply), it can be expected to increase the amount collected. A study carried out by Donald T. Oellerich, Irwin Garfinkel, and Robins (see box, page 25) demonstrates that collections of child support fall far short of their potential. The researchers simulated the effects of five scenarios for the collection of private child support: (1) the system as of 1983, under which only 60 percent of those potentially eligible for child support have a legal child support order and only 70 percent of the amount owed is actually paid; (2) the 1983 system with the total amount owed actually collected; (3) the 1983 system, but with all awards based on a uniform standard; (4) a uniform standard, the 1983 proportion of awards to eligibles, and 100 percent collections; and (5) a uniform standard, all those eligible for child support having awards, and the collection of the full amount owed (in other words, a perfect system).

The results of the simulations are presented in Table 3. The two uniform standards that are tested are that of Wisconsin and Colorado. The Wisconsin standard takes into account only the income of the noncustodial parent, almost always the father. It is a percentage of that parent's income: 17 percent of gross income for one child, 25 percent for two, 29 percent for three, 31 percent for four, and 33 percent for five or more children. The Colorado standard takes into account the mother's income as well. The costs of the children are determined on the basis of the combined gross incomes of both parents. These costs are then proportionately shared by the parents, based on the proportion of gross income each receives. Thus in Colorado child support awards are sensitive to the relative incomes of women and men.

The results show that enormous increases in child support are possible. A perfect system would collect \$28 billion under the Colorado standard and over \$32 billion under the Wisconsin standard, compared with the current (1983) collections of under \$7 billion.

Columns 2 and 3 of Table 3 give the totals that can be collected by custodial families who are and are not welfare recipients. The effects of a perfect system of collection are much more dramatic for families on AFDC than for other families. The upper limit of collections is over 600 percent more than is collected now. These numbers indicate the difficulty of securing awards and collecting private child support for poor families, among whom are most of the never-married mothers. In further simulations described in their paper, Oellerich, Garfinkel, and Robins estimate that under a perfect system, AFDC participation would decline by 16–17 percent and AFDC costs would decrease by 30–33 percent. These numbers indicate that although private child

**Table 3**  
**Transfers in 1983 for Private Child Support**  
**Versus Potential Transfers**  
**(billions of 1983 dollars)**

Scenario	Total Eligible Families (1)	Families Not on AFDC (2)	Families on AFDC (3)
1. 1983 payments	6.83 (3.84)	6.26 (3.21)	.57 (.63)
2. 1983 awards	9.68 (3.84)	8.52 (3.21)	1.16 (.63)
3. Uniform standard; 1983 number of awards; 1983 collection rate			
Wisconsin <sup>a</sup>	13.33	12.50	.83
Colorado <sup>b</sup>	11.22 (3.84)	10.40 (3.21)	.82 (.63)
4. Uniform standard; 1983 number of awards; 100 percent collection			
Wisconsin <sup>a</sup>	19.58	17.94	1.64
Colorado <sup>b</sup>	16.70 (3.84)	15.07 (3.21)	1.63 (.63)
5. Theoretical upper limit			
Wisconsin <sup>a</sup>	32.44	28.01	4.43
Colorado <sup>b</sup>	28.03 (7.89)	23.92 (5.82)	4.11 (2.07)

**Source:** Donald T. Oellerich, Irwin Garfinkel, and Philip K. Robins, "Private Child Support: Current and Potential Impacts," IRP Discussion No. 888-89, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1989, p. 11.

**Note:** A family is eligible for child support if it contains children under 18 who have living noncustodial parents. Numbers in parentheses are the number of eligible families (in millions) with an obligation.

<sup>a</sup>The Wisconsin standard is based on the income of the noncustodial parent.

<sup>b</sup>The Colorado standard is based on the incomes of both parents.

support has the potential to make significant reductions in AFDC caseloads and costs, it will not replace AFDC. Even under a perfect system, over 80 percent of the caseload and two-thirds of the costs of welfare will remain.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that child support awards have been shrinking is not an indication that no more can be collected. Absent parents can contribute much more than they now do to the economic well-being of their children. Furthermore the reductions in award amounts may not indicate that women and children in single-parent families are getting any poorer, if the reductions are related to rising incomes of women relative to men. But questions can be raised about the equity of standards that take into account the income of the custodial parent as well as that of the noncustodial parent. To what extent is such a system fair? This highly controversial issue is discussed at length by Irwin Garfinkel and Marygold Melli in their forthcoming Discussion Paper, "The Use of Normative Standards in Family Law Decisions" (see box, page 25). ■

(Notes on p. 29)

# Small grants and sabbatical grants

## New competition

The Institute and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are sponsoring the ninth competition in their Small Grants and Sabbatical Grants program, which is designed to stimulate interest in research on poverty.

Four small grants of up to \$12,500 each are being offered. Two sabbatical grants of up to \$25,000 each are being offered for the academic year 1990–91. The sabbatical grants are for work at the Institute for Research on Poverty in Madison or at the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in Washington. For researchers who wish to spend an additional semester in residence at Madison, the Institute will provide assistance in seeking support from other university departments and institutes.

For guidelines for grant applications, write to the Small Grants Program, Institute for Research on Poverty, 1180 Observatory Drive, 3412 Social Science Building, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706. The application deadline is February 16, 1990.

## Proposals funded under Round VIII competition

### Small grants

*Bias in Estimating the Benefits of Government Programs Due to Misapplication of Composite Commodity Theorems: Empirical Estimates*

This study will attempt to gauge the extent of aggregation bias in estimating the benefits of government programs. Recent research indicates that the typical approach to such estimates may exaggerate program benefits. Using data from the American Housing Survey and the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey, the study will produce empirical estimates intended to improve our understanding of the relative desirability of three different program types: rent control, public housing, and other subsidized housing. Principal investigator: Edgar O. Olsen, University of Virginia.

*Changes in Household Composition and Income Strategies of Poor Urban Mothers*

A comparison of two time periods—the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s—will relate changes in extended family households among racial and ethnic groups in New York City to changes in income sources and employment patterns among poor mothers in the city. The research will address the question of whether women in households consisting of extended families have higher employment levels and therefore are less dependent on public assistance. The data will be taken from the March Current Population Surveys for selected years. Principal investigator: Terry J. Rosenberg, Community Service Society of New York.

*Methods for the Study of Episodes of Homelessness*

In analyzing data concerning the homeless, sampling problems arise in the study of “repeated duration” (the length of time that families or individuals spend in and out of shelters for the homeless). The demand for such shelter depends upon the number of people requesting it and the length of stays. Understanding this total demand is necessary if we are to devise satisfactory policies for the care of the homeless. The study will make use of a new survey of homelessness and the demand for emergency shelter in New York City. Principal investigator: Tony Lancaster, Brown University.

*Permanent and Transitory Economic Status as Determinants of Mortality among Nonwhite and White Older Males: Does Poverty Kill?*

With panel data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Older Men for the period 1966–83, this project will examine differences in mortality among whites and nonwhites. The relationship between death and such characteristics as wealth, lifetime and current income, poverty status, marriage, education, parents’ status, retirement, and health will be explored. The results may help to answer a number of questions: Can racial differences in mortality be explained as a consequence of income differences? Does the recently noted improving economic status of the aged result from the earlier deaths of poorer individuals? Principal investigator: Paul L. Menchik, Michigan State University.

(Continued on p. 30)

## IRP-ASPE research workshop

The Institute and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services jointly sponsored a workshop at Madison, May 3–4, 1989. The following research projects, supported under the Small Grants Program, were presented and discussed.

John Bound, University of Michigan, “Disability Transfers and the Labor Force Attachment of Older Men: Evidence from the Historical Record” (available as IRP Discussion Paper No. 899–89).

The postwar period has seen a dramatic growth in both the availability and the generosity of income maintenance programs targeted at the disabled. The number of individuals—particularly older men—receiving these benefits rose sharply through the 1960s and 1970s. During the same period of time, the proportion of older working-age men (aged 45–64) who dropped out of the labor force doubled.

This research uses trends in self-reported disability from the late 1940s through the late 1980s to gauge the impact of the growth of income maintenance programs for the disabled on the labor force attachment of older working-aged men. Assuming that the actual health of men in this age group has not changed, the trends provide inferences about the disincentive effects of disability programs. Data are taken from the censuses of 1970 and 1980, surveys conducted by the Social Security Administration, and the National Health Interview Surveys. The results suggest that the growth of income maintenance programs for the disabled can explain up to 80 percent of the drop in labor force participation of men aged 45–54 during the 1970s but considerably less (as little as 28 percent) of the larger decline for older groups.

Rachel Connelly, Bowdoin College, “The Effect of Child Care Costs on Married Women’s Labor Force Participation.”

In examining the structural relationship between child care costs and the decision of a mother to work outside the home, it is theorized that one of the parents (almost always the mother) is designated the care-giving parent, and whether or not that parent works will depend—among other things—on the total cost for child care for all children in the family per hour worked by the care-giver. A theoretical model is constructed and tested with data from the 1984 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation. The labor

force participation rate of married women is found to be sensitive to the average cost of child care. A number of other factors, such as the existence of nonlabor income and the predicted wage of the mother, have different effects depending on whether one is looking at the decision to pay for child care or measuring the amount that a working mother pays, once she has made the decision to purchase child care.

Timothy Maloney, Bowdoin College, “AFDC Eligibility and the Returns to Schooling among Young Women” (to be available as an IRP Discussion Paper).

Recent policy initiatives under AFDC (such as Learnfare and provisions of the federal Family Support Act of 1988) have emphasized general educational attainment as the means by which welfare recipients can become self-sufficient. Although we know something about the rate of return to education for the general population, we know little about how this rate of return may differ for a self-selected AFDC population. This study econometrically models the interrelated processes that determine educational attainment, AFDC eligibility, labor market activity, and market wage rates. Then returns to education are estimated for a sample of young women in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Preliminary results of this ongoing project indicate that the returns to education in terms of wage gains among those likely to be eligible for AFDC are substantial.

Gary Solon, University of Michigan, “Intergenerational Income Mobility in the United States” (available as IRP Discussion Paper No. 894–89).

If poverty and wealth tend to be passed on from generation to generation, as many suggest, claims about equal opportunity in America begin to sound hollow. This new analysis, based on the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, is designed to be less susceptible to biases than the small number of earlier studies have been. Although the present study also has limitations, for example, in its reliance on a single data set, it suggests that intergenerational mobility is smaller than was previously reported. Results suggest that the correlation of fathers’ long-run earnings, hourly wages, and family income with that of their sons is at least .4, whereas about .2 was suggested by earlier research. (A correlation of 1 would indicate that a son’s income was always about the same as that of his father; 0 would indicate that there was no correlation at all.)

Alden Speare, Jr., and Michael Rendall, Brown University, "Poverty, Living Arrangements, and Residential Mobility of Elderly Persons" (to be available as an IRP Discussion Paper).

Data on the elderly between 1983 and 1986 from the Survey of Income and Program Participation were analyzed to study the relationship between poverty and the living arrangements of the elderly. Particular attention was paid to the way poverty is measured, since the elderly—especially the oldest groups—tend to have smaller current income than others (because they do not work) but more assets.

The study revealed that a number of the poor elderly, especially those who are single, do live in extended households, usually with their families. If they were to live alone, the official poverty rate for this group would be 50 percent higher. So, although extended families have declined over recent decades, their role in alleviating poverty remains a major one for single elderly persons.

On the other hand, neither poverty nor disability could be shown to lead elderly persons to change their living arrangements from living alone to living with others.

Jay D. Teachman, University of Maryland, and Karen Polonko, Old Dominion University, "Negotiating Divorce Outcomes: Can We Identify Patterns in Divorce Settlements?" (available as IRP Discussion Paper No. 886-89); "Providing for the Children: Socioeconomic Resources of Parents and Child Support in the United States" (available as IRP Discussion Paper No. 887-89).

Both research projects are related to the need to provide for children outside of nuclear families, now that such families are increasingly likely to end in divorce. "Negotiating Divorce Outcomes" establishes that parents make trade-offs in divorce settlements, negotiating custody, visitation, child support, and the division of marital property. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 show that there are discernible patterns in divorce outcomes which are unlikely to be random. The authors note, however, that they cannot reject the influence of additional factors, such as judicial practices and divorce law, on divorce outcomes. "Providing for Children" focuses on the factors that influence child support awards and amounts. A sample of divorced women from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 reveals that the socioeconomic resources of parents at the time of the divorce, as measured by earnings of the father and earnings and education of the mother, affect their ability to negotiate a settlement and the motivation of the noncustodial parent to provide support. Socioeconomic resources are found to be significant predictors of child support outcomes. Thus the most economically vulnerable children are the hardest hit by divorce, having no award or a small one.

Peter R. Virgadamo, University of Southern California, "Urban Poverty and Church Charity in Colonial Boston" (available as Discussion Paper No. 896-89).

Drawing on archival sources, this research contrasts the practice of charity toward the poor by two very different minority churches, Anglican and Baptist, in eighteenth-century colonial Boston, when the Puritan faith was dominant. The brief glimpses into poverty and efforts to alleviate it indicate that the feminization of poverty is nothing new: Widows and orphans were the chief recipients of assistance. And though it is close to impossible to construct a poverty line for the 1700s, it is clear that church charity provided only a small portion of what the needy required to survive.

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### Why are child support collections declining?

(Continued from p. 26)

<sup>1</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, *Background Material and Data on Programs within the Jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), p. 640.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 638. Note that the \$4.6 billion is the amount collected through the enforcement program, not the total amount collected.

<sup>3</sup>This was the first time the tax system was used for issues unrelated to tax liabilities. This law laid the groundwork for subsequent withholding provisions, treating child support as a tax. See Philip K. Robins and Katherine P. Dickinson, "Child Support Enforcement," *Journal of the Institute for Socioeconomic Studies*, 7 (Summer 1982), 48-64.

<sup>4</sup>The data on the proportion of women with awards who are never married comes from the Current Population Survey (CPS) match files, which merge the April Child Support Supplements covering the years 1978, 1981, 1983, and 1985 with the March CPS covering the same years.

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 152, Child Support and Alimony, 1985* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987).

<sup>6</sup>See Robert G. Williams, "Child Support and the Costs of Rearing Children: Using Formulas to Set Adequate Awards," *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 36 (Fall 1985), 41-48; and "Guidelines for Setting Levels of Child Support Orders," *Family Law Quarterly*, 21 (Fall 1987), 281-324; Diane Dodson, "A Guide to the Guidelines," *Family Advocate*, 10 (Fall 1987), 4-10; Robert D. Thompson and Susan F. Paikin, "Formulas and Guidelines for Support," *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 36 (Fall 1985), 33-40; and Willard H. Douglas, "Factors in Determining Child Support," *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 36 (Fall 1985), 27-32.

<sup>7</sup>See Nora Cate Schaeffer, "Principles of Justice in Judgments about Child Support," IRP Discussion Paper No. 852-87, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987.

<sup>8</sup>National Center for State Courts. "Child Support Guidelines Summary Update," NCSC Project Office, 4001 North Ninth Street, Arlington, Va., loose tables, 1989.

<sup>9</sup>Robins, "Why Are Child Support Award Amounts Declining?" p. 14.

<sup>10</sup>Oellerich, Garfinkel, and Robins, "Private Child Support" (see box, p. 25), pp. 19-21.

## Small grants and sabbatical grants

(Continued from p. 27)

### Sabbatical grants

#### *The Influence of Social Experiments on Government Decisionmaking*

On the basis of a review of the literature on the relationship between policy research and policy formulation, this project will formulate and test hypotheses concerning social experimentation: its objectives and its effects on policy. The social experiments over the past two decades will be summarized, and by means of interviews with researchers and policy-makers, the effects of selected experimental studies on policy will be assessed. Principal investigator: David H. Greenberg, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

#### *Responding to the Homeless and the Population at Risk of Homelessness*

Have rising rents and falling incomes of the poor contributed to the increasing numbers of homeless? To answer this question, the American Housing Survey will be used to analyze data from the 1980s in eight large metropolitan areas. A further question—Has the supply of low-cost rental housing been adversely affected by changes in federal housing policy?—will be explored using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Principal investigator: Karin Ringheim, University of Michigan.

The following table is a corrected version of Table 1 in "What Is the Underclass—And Is It Growing?" by Christopher Jencks, *Focus*, 12:1, 1989, p. 18. The author and the editor regret the error in reporting the percentage of men aged 25–34 who were employed full time, year round.

**Table 1**  
Income and Percentage Working Regularly among Men Aged 25 to 34  
in 1967 and 1986, by Education

	Years of Schooling					All
	0–8	9–11	12	13–15	16 or more	
<b>Income of full-time, year-round workers</b> (in 1986 dollars)						
1967	15,027	18,235	21,747	24,514	29,657	22,397
1986	13,678	17,920	21,806	25,274	33,540	25,351
Percentage change	–9.0	–1.7	+0.3	+5.3	+13.1	+13.2
<b>Percentage employed full time, year round</b>						
1967	68.6	74.8	83.6	83.2	80.8	79.8
1986	48.8	52.9	68.3	72.1	79.6	69.6
<b>Income of men, including nonworkers</b> (in 1986 dollars)						
1967	13,246	17,026	20,401	22,368	26,971	20,535
1986	9,560	13,108	18,391	21,532	29,552	20,928
Percentage change	–27.8	–23.0	–9.9	–3.7	+9.6	+1.9

**Sources:** U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 60, *Income in 1967 of Persons in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), Table 4, and Series P-60, No. 159, *Money Income of Households, Families, and Persons in the United States: 1986* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), Table 35. Price changes were estimated using the fixed-weight price index for Personal Consumption Expenditure from the National Income and Product Accounts (see *Economic Report of the President* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989], Table 4).

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