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Disconnected Americans

Over the past two decades, the structure of public income support in America has changed drastically. As the focus has shifted towards providing income support for workers, cash assistance caseloads have fallen. This has led to a growing interest on the part of researchers and policymakers in understanding the circumstances and characteristics of those who appear to have no source of income nor are they accessing publicly available supports—the “disconnected.” The topic of what it means to be disconnected in America is explored in this issue.

Among the many challenges to studying the disconnected population is the current lack of agreement on exactly what it means to be disconnected; many different definitions are possible. In the years since welfare reform and the creation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in 1996, the term “disconnected” has most often been used to describe those who left TANF cash assistance, but who were not working in the formal labor market. As TANF caseloads have decreased, the term has been increasingly used to describe all low-income mothers who are neither receiving TANF (whether or not they ever received it) nor working. The reports summarized here, all of which were supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, continue the evolution of the concept of disconnection; they use a number of different approaches to define and analyze the disconnected population.

The first article, by Pamela Loprest and Austin Nichols of The Urban Institute, defines disconnected single-mothers families as those without earnings, TANF, or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) in the previous four months, and where the mother is not in school. They assess how many such families there are in the United States, their economic circumstances, what other benefits or income sources they have, how they differ from other low-income single-mother families, and their patterns of disconnection over time.

The second article, by Maria Cancian, Eunhee Han, and Jennifer L. Noyes from IRP, draws on data from Wisconsin to look in detail at participation in and disconnection from a number of public sources of support other than TANF cash assistance. The authors’ primary definition of disconnection is no program participation (defined as TANF, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP], subsidized child care, Medicaid, SSI, Social Security Disability Insurance [SSDI], and unemployment insurance benefits), child support receipt, or earnings one year after entering the study; they also use four alternative definitions. They compare outcomes across three populations, including some who have never received TANF cash assistance. By examining three distinct cohorts, one of which participated during the recent economic downturn, the authors provide evidence on changes over time in participation and disconnection.

The third article, by Donald Bruce, William Hamblen, and Xiaowen Liu from the University of Tennessee Center for Business and Economic Research, also seeks to look at a

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broader population of the disconnected, this time in Tennessee. The authors use three definitions of disconnection to describe those who have left TANF and are not working, and also consider those who are unemployed and temporarily or permanently disconnected from public health insurance.

Finally, the fourth article, by David J. Harding, Jessica J. B. Wyse, Cheyney Dobson, and Jeffrey D. Morenoff from the University of Michigan, uses in-depth interview data to examine the well-being of former prisoners, a group at high risk of disconnection. The authors assess how former prisoners make ends meet after their release from prison, how some are able to make the connections required for economic security while others are not, and which services and supports create pathways to employment or long-term legitimate income sources.

Additional information, including a fourth university-based study funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families under its "University-Based Research Partnerships on Disconnected Families," is linked in the inaugural edition of the *Focus* electronic supplement, which provides links to additional readings and videos related to the articles in each issue. The supplemental materials on disconnection include a video presentation featuring two authors from this issue, a research synthesis brief on Disconnected Families and TANF from The Urban Institute, and more information about the public programs discussed in the articles, among other links. ■

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