

# Can we improve job retention and advancement among low-income working parents?

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Employment rates among low-income parents have risen quite dramatically in the past decade. Among single mothers, labor force participation rose from about 67 percent in the early 1990s to 78 percent by 2000; among those who had been on welfare the preceding year, labor force activity rose from about 30 percent to nearly 60 percent.<sup>1</sup> But the annual earnings and income of many parents remain stubbornly low, even though their employment rates are now fairly high. For instance, a study of people starting low-wage jobs in 1996 found that, three years later, about 50 percent of male workers and 60 percent of female workers still had annualized earnings below the poverty level for a family of four. Among those leaving welfare, average earnings remain below \$10,000 a year. For parents with less than a high school diploma, weak skills, and limited or spotty work experience, the prospects of providing stable family incomes are very limited, especially if they are single.<sup>2</sup>

At least two factors limit the annual earnings of less-skilled adults in the U.S. labor market. First is *low job retention*. Some of these workers lose or leave jobs frequently, and may experience long periods of time between jobs. This joblessness directly reduces their annual earnings and inhibits wage growth. Second is *slow or no advancement*. Even when these workers are steadily employed, their wages and benefits are very low and their prospects for advancement, either in their current job or by switching to a better job, are poor.

What public policies—federal, state, or local—might help improve retention and advancement among low-wage workers? To what extent might these initiatives involve the private sector? What does the evidence from research and evaluation show, and are there promising models that deserve more attention? This article summarizes our exploration of such questions.<sup>3</sup>

## Job turnover and retention difficulties among low-wage workers

In any given year, about 20 percent of the U.S. workforce begins a new job; the median length of time on the job is

4–5 years. Rates of turnover are highest among young workers, who frequently work part time while in school or engage in “job-shopping” early in their careers. But turnover is also relatively high among particular groups of youth or adults: high school dropouts, those with weak cognitive skills, minorities, women with young children, and the formerly incarcerated.<sup>4</sup> About 40 percent of low-income families with low employment levels are headed by high school dropouts; they tend to have high rates of voluntary and involuntary job turnover, and are especially likely to leave a job with no other work lined up. Low-income single mothers have high rates of turnover even after accounting for their lower educational attainment, and the more children they have, the more frequently they quit or change jobs. African Americans quit jobs somewhat less frequently than other workers at similar wages, but are much more likely to be discharged. Average job tenure among adults in single-parent families, and among those with low incomes, is only one-half to two-thirds as long as in two-parent or middle-income families.

Job tenure among current or former welfare recipients is well below that of the typical U.S. worker. Among recipients who entered the job market in the 1980s and early 1990s, job turnover often occurred within nine months or less after the new job was accepted. As many more recipients left welfare and entered the strong job market of the later 1990s, average tenure improved somewhat, eventually averaging well over a year per job spell. But large majorities of former and current welfare recipients participating in the five-year National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS) experienced some time without work even during the fifth year of the study. High rates of absenteeism, often associated with child care, health, and transportation problems, sometimes result in women quitting or being fired.<sup>5</sup>

Most workers make large wage gains early in their careers, sometimes by changing jobs early and then settling in and accumulating tenure with specific employers. Wage gains moderate over time, but remain positive for most workers over much of their working lives. Yet this is less true for less-skilled workers such as those without high school diplomas; their wages grow more slowly with time or work experience. In a study of low earners over an eight-year period, from 1993 to 2001, researchers found that few seemed permanently to escape their low-income status. When they restricted the study sample to those with poor education, low wages, or in low-income families, only 15–20 percent of those consistently earning less

**Table 1**  
**Examples of Programs Providing Financial Incentives to Low-Wage Workers**

Program and Dates of Operation	Target Group	Financial Incentive
Earned Income Tax Credit (1975–); a federal program	Low-income tax filers with earnings	Initially provides 40 cents per additional dollar of earnings; credit diminishes by up to 21 cents with each additional dollar earned. Maximum credit of about \$4,000 for family with two children
New Hope Program, Milwaukee (1994–98); a private initiative	Adults with a household income no greater than 150% of poverty level	Monthly earnings supplement for full-time work (average benefit \$1,500 a year), subsidized health insurance and child care; community service job if full-time employment unavailable
Minnesota Family Investment Program (1994–98); a state program	Cash assistance applicants and recipients	Individuals remained eligible for assistance until their income reached 140% of poverty level (average benefit \$1,800 a year)

than \$12,000 a year at the beginning were earning above \$15,000 at the end.<sup>6</sup>

The difficulties low-wage workers encounter because of their poor education and skills and their often limited work experience are compounded by the characteristics of their jobs and their employers. Low-skilled workers are less likely to find employment in large firms, in unionized firms, and in firms paying higher wages and offering better benefits. Low earners who do get jobs in higher-wage sectors of the economy—such as construction, manufacturing, transportation, and health services—have higher rates of advancement than those employed elsewhere. Lower-wage workers with part-time jobs or working nonstandard shifts have higher turnover rates.

Even within specific sectors of the economy and particular geographic areas, firms often pay different levels of wages to workers with similar skills, depending on the employment model they adopt. Some seek to be competitive through a low-wage, low-cost strategy (the “Walmart model”); others rely more on improving productivity by training and policies encouraging higher worker retention. Whatever the merits of either strategy from the employer’s perspective, employment in the higher-wage firms undoubtedly is to the advantage of the worker. But the ability of many low-income workers to obtain such jobs may be limited. Compounding workers’ skill problems, such firms tend to be located relatively far away from the geographic neighborhoods where most low earners live; therefore, many will lack information about and access to informal job networks or may not have reliable transportation. For minorities and especially those with criminal records, these “spatial mismatch” problems may be compounded by employer discrimination in hiring.<sup>7</sup>

### **Policies for improving retention and advancement**

The litany of difficulties we have laid out above suggests that job market strategies for improving the earnings and

job stability of disadvantaged workers should seek to (1) directly supplement their low wages and benefits; (2) address personal/family needs and workplace problems through case management or service provision; (3) improve work-related skills; and (4) improve access to and interactions with employers that offer better opportunities. We examine these issues below.

### **Supplementing low wages: Financial incentives and supports**

Many different kinds of financial incentive programs for work have been tried since the 1990s. Evaluations of these efforts generally support the view that they can raise employment rates and earnings among low-wage workers. Here we briefly discuss three different types of programs (see Table 1).<sup>8</sup>

The clearest example of a financial incentive program is the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which now provides a roughly 40 percent earnings subsidy to low-income working parents up to about \$10,000 of earned income. Research suggests that the EITC has in particular raised employment levels among single mothers.<sup>9</sup> Many states established an earned income disregard under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); these provided welfare recipients with a different type of financial incentive to increase work effort. One such successful effort was the Minnesota Family Independence Plan (MFIP); under MFIP, large gains in earnings and employment and reductions in poverty were directly attributable to the financial incentives. Among private initiatives, New Hope, a pilot project in Milwaukee that offered health, child care benefits, and community service jobs in addition to the earnings supplement, enrolled a broad range of low-income parents, not just welfare recipients. But New Hope’s initial gains in employment and earnings faded over time, in part because the control group also experienced gains.<sup>10</sup>

Research on MFIP and programs like it indicates that they are most successful when subsidies are tied to full-time work in the labor market or are accompanied by other

**Table 2**  
**Examples of Programs Providing Case Management and Services to Low-Wage Workers**

Program and Dates of Operation	Target Group	Services
Portland NEWWS Program (1993–96)	Cash assistance applicants and recipients	Pre-employment program providing job search, education, training, and case management. Strong employment focus with emphasis on high-quality jobs
Post-Employment Services Demonstration (1994–96)	Cash assistance recipients who found jobs	Counseling and support, job search assistance, resolution of benefits issues, and service referral
Illinois Employment Retention and Advancement Program (2002– )	Employed cash assistance recipients working at least 30 hours a week for 6 consecutive months	Job matching, job placement assistance, career and personal counseling, and service referral

work or job search requirements. Unless the subsidies are permanent, their positive effects on work tend to fade over time, though they do not entirely disappear. And the budgetary costs of permanent subsidies for low-wage workers can be substantial, especially in their more generous forms, such as New Hope.

There are some other disadvantages as well. Tax credits or subsidies that phase out as income rises may create incentives for those in the phase-out range, especially two-earner married couples, to reduce rather than increase work effort. Perhaps the largest question involves the extent to which financial incentives improve retention or advancement for those already in the labor market. Evidence from MFIP and from a similar program, the Canadian Self-Sufficiency Program (1992–99), does indicate that the subsidies generated more consistent work over the course of a year. But modest improvements in job retention are likely to have even more modest effects on advancement, given that work experience produces only limited wage growth among low-wage workers.<sup>11</sup>

### Case management and service provision

Many local programs provide a mix of pre- and postemployment services and case management to aid unskilled workers in moving into the workforce and to enhance their prospects for retention and advancement. Welfare-to-work studies provide some evidence that combining pressure to find a job with a mix of services, including job search, education and training, and case management might be more effective in moving people into employment than a set of services or treatments that are provided separately. The Portland site in the NEWWS evaluation used this approach to generate large increases in employment, earnings, and job stability. This site was also notable in its encouragement of participants to find higher-wage jobs and employers, wherever possible.

For-profit temp agencies or not-for-profit groups often provide some pre-employment services, particularly in job search or job readiness. From our perspective, the key question is whether these groups can improve the quality of the jobs to which low earners have access—their starting wages and benefits, or potential for advancement—

beyond what individuals achieve on their own. Research to date does suggest that labor market intermediaries, including private temp agencies, might have some positive effects, though we need more evidence on the effects of services provided by for-profit and not-for-profit job developers generally.<sup>12</sup>

Case management services provided after individuals find jobs do not seem to have produced results. In the Post-Employment Services Demonstration, welfare agency staff sought to provide counseling and support, job search assistance, and service referral. The project did not promote greater job retention. But implementation was unsatisfactory: employment services were quite limited, case workers carried very large caseloads, and services were poorly targeted to those needing help.<sup>13</sup> Several sites in the national Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Project are currently testing the effectiveness of postemployment services.<sup>14</sup> One Illinois project (Table 2) targeting a group of TANF recipients who appear to be stuck in low-wage jobs is providing services to help them increase earnings in their current jobs or find better jobs. Early results have been positive, but it is too soon to draw firm conclusions about the effects of ERA programs.

### Improving work skills

Like other employment-related services, education and training can be provided before employment or after individuals are working. Among existing institutions and systems that can play a role are community colleges, local one-stop centers created under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the adult education system, and nonprofit and for-profit private educational providers.

Particularly before employment, programs with a strong focus on basic education but only limited links to employment and job training—an approach more common before the implementation of TANF—have not generated significant earnings gains. Most have performed worse than mixed-service or job-search interventions.<sup>15</sup> These programs, which focus on building basic skills and obtaining a high-school equivalency diploma (GED), provide too little knowledge related to the local job market,

**Table 3**  
**Examples of Programs Promoting Skill Development among Low-Wage Workers**

Program and Dates of Operation	Target Group	Services
Riverside, CA, Employment Retention and Advancement Program (2000– )	Newly employed welfare recipients working at least 20 hours per week	Two programs to promote participation in education and training in combination with employment are being evaluated; one requires individuals to work 20 hours a week, the other has no requirements
Center for Employment Training, San Jose, CA (initial program 1982–88, replication program 1995– )	Low-income youth; single mothers on welfare	Basic skills and training provided in worklike setting; full-time commitment by participants; employer involvement in design of training; job placement full-time commitment by participants; employer assistance
Kentucky Community and Technical College System (1997– )	Low-wage workers	Systemwide adaptations to accommodate working students: rapid course and program approval, academic credit for workforce training, fractional credits, and incentives to develop and offer for-credit courses

and their credentials are often not recognized or rewarded by private-sector employers.

Job training, in contrast, has shown somewhat stronger positive effects, particularly on earnings among disadvantaged adult women. This emerged clearly, for example, in the national Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), the forerunner of WIA. The effects on the earnings of the women were fairly large relative to the costs per trainee, and on-the-job training produced larger earnings gains than standard classroom training.<sup>16</sup> The effects upon men’s earnings were smaller, though still often substantial relative to costs.

Training that leads to established credentials that are valued by employers has produced particularly strong results. Returns to Associate degrees and other certification from community colleges have been positive. The success of the Portland NEWWS program may be due to its emphasis on increasing the number of high school dropouts who obtained both a high school diploma or GED and a second education or training certificate, or a trade license. Efforts to ensure that the training is relevant to local employers with available jobs have paid off. The Center for Employment Training (CET) in San Jose, California, which integrated basic education and job training with such links, produced strong results in early studies (Table 3).<sup>17</sup>

There have been fewer studies of postemployment training strategies. One effort in Riverside, California (see Table 3) targets welfare recipients who are working but remain on assistance. Early evidence from experimental studies of this and other similar programs suggests they are not affecting labor market outcomes. One major limitation to this kind of program is that workers who might want to go to school may already be overloaded with family and work obligations. Workers with low skills or little English may also find that their access to such programs is limited. To make these programs more accessible to low-skilled working adults, states and localities

have introduced curriculum and instructional reforms such as “bridge” programs to prepare workers for training, accelerated programs, and programs subdivided into modules that can be completed at different times. Kentucky, for example, launched a series of reforms to make the community college system more responsive to the needs of low-income working adults (Table 3). Most such initiatives have not yet been evaluated.

A very different variant of such training is aimed primarily at the “hard to serve,” those with multiple barriers to work. This “transitional jobs” approach combines training and support services with paid work experience for some period of time, usually less than a year. One such project is the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) program in New York for ex-offenders. The best evidence for this general category of programs comes from the National Supported Work Demonstration project from the mid-1970s. In that controlled experiment, the postprogram earnings of welfare recipients increased quite substantially relative to those in the control group. No overall effect was observed for adult men or youth, but a recent reexamination suggests more positive results for adult men with criminal records.<sup>18</sup>

### Employer-focused efforts

Efforts to tie the disadvantaged more closely to employers, especially those that pay higher wages, can have important payoffs. Labor market intermediaries, including temp agencies and other nonprofit organizations, often play this role. These agencies seek to improve the access of less-skilled individuals to better employers, and some provide training to improve the quality of the “match” between employers and potential employees. But such training must be at least partly general in nature, so as not to diminish the worker’s ability to move among employers.

Broadly speaking, there are two categories of employer-focused efforts: (1) those that provide services and train-

**Table 4**  
**Examples of Employer-Based Strategies for Low-Wage Workers**

Program and Dates of Operation	Target Group	Services
Cleveland ACHIEVE Program (2002– )	Entry-level workers under 200 percent of the poverty line in nursing homes who have been in their current jobs less than 6 months	Regular on-site office hours for counseling, case management and support services, meetings for social support and life skills, training for supervisors
Project QUEST, San Antonio, TX (1992– )	Low-income individuals	Provides training tracks for numerous occupations within several industries, including health, business systems, and maintenance. Occupations are targeted based on demand by local firms
Kentucky Career Pathways (2004– )	Low-wage workers in targeted industries	Grants provided to partnerships of businesses and community colleges to develop and implement career pathways in a range of occupations

ing to potential workers for jobs with specific employers, and (2) those that also try to influence employers' human resource policies—recruitment, training, compensation practices, and job restructuring.

The efforts of temp agencies and training programs like the San Jose CET (Table 3) clearly fit into the first of these categories. So, too, do some postemployment services, such as the Cleveland ACHIEVE program (Table 4), that address employees' needs and provide supports in the workplace. Preliminary results from the evaluation of ACHIEVE suggest the program improved retention rates within the first 30 days but that gains began to diminish over time.<sup>19</sup>

In the second category are postemployment programs generally known as *incumbent worker training*. Originating more than 30 years ago, these programs are typically operated by states; they provide employers with grants to partner with training providers and to offer specific training to their incumbent and, in some cases, new employees. These programs are generally designed to provide opportunities for career advancement within the firm or industry, and many are funded directly by employer tax revenues.

Few incumbent-worker training programs focus specifically on low-wage workers, though a handful of states have set aside funds to provide basic skills and English literacy training.<sup>20</sup> The evidence is clear that such programs have benefitted employers by raising productivity and lowering costs.<sup>21</sup> Apprenticeships and internships (which are traditional school-to-career pathways for youth), privately provided training programs, and occupational training in vocational schools and community colleges broadly fit into this category. These have generally shown strong returns on investment. It is less clear from the evidence to date that these programs have benefitted low-wage workers, though it is plausible to assume that they can.

*Sectoral strategies* aim to directly improve matching of low-income or other targeted job seekers to employment opportunities in local and regional economies, particu-

larly in large and growing job sectors. Project QUEST in San Antonio, for instance, works with employers in the health care and financial sectors. A central focus of many such efforts is to restructure recruitment, training, promotion, and compensation practices. The aim is to improve the access of low-income workers to existing jobs and to raise the quantity and quality of jobs available within those regional labor markets. No sectoral initiatives have yet been rigorously evaluated, although some longitudinal studies have shown improvements in employment and wage rates.<sup>22</sup>

A subset of sectoral initiatives seeks to build *career ladders* in low-wage occupational categories. Career ladders offer a sequence of connected skill upgrading and job opportunities, generally in private-sector employment. Each step on the ladder leads to a job and to further education or training. Career ladder efforts are generally not geared toward a specific employer, but typically apply to a certain sector or industry, such as health care. Several states have recently undertaken regional career ladder initiatives. In 2004, for example, Kentucky enacted such a program, which awards grants to develop career pathways to help low-income workers advance in occupations that meet employers' needs (Table 4). The grants are awarded to local partnerships of businesses and community colleges; most commonly, firms in health and manufacturing are involved.

In all of these efforts, third-party intermediaries attempt to bridge the mismatches that separate employers from potential employees.<sup>23</sup> Some intermediaries work with particular groups; others focus on particular industry sectors. For example, CEO in New York and the Safer Foundation in Chicago work exclusively with ex-offenders, while Focus: Hope in Detroit specializes primarily in training machinists and other skilled workers for the auto industry. The credibility of the intermediaries is critical to such efforts; they must be perceived as “honest brokers” who try to meet the needs of both sides in the employment relationship, and not merely as advocates for the disadvantaged.

There has been little rigorous evaluation of publicly supported, employer-focused strategies or of intermediaries for the disadvantaged, but the evidence that does exist suggests that employer-focused activities can have quite positive effects. Nor have there been many efforts to bring the role of intermediaries to a scale where they might really have an effect on local labor markets (though the Annie E. Casey Foundation's "Jobs Initiative" in six large cities has attempted to do so).<sup>24</sup>

## Some conclusions

Our review of the policy evaluation literature revealed no "magic bullets." Relatively few of the programs or efforts we examined can with certainty solve the problems of unskilled and disadvantaged workers in ways that improve job retention and advancement. In general, we conclude that, for low earners:

1. Financial incentives seem to generate more steady employment, especially if they are tied to full-time work; but these supports must be permanent, and their effects on advancement are likely very limited.
2. A range of labor market intermediaries, including temp agencies, can improve access to the sorts of higher-wage firms in which retention and advancement are both stronger.
3. Education and job training are most successful when they provide workers with credentials that employers recognize, such as Associate degrees, and when the training provides skills that match private-sector demands in the local labor market.
4. The returns to privately provided employer training are high, though such programs have in general not been specifically targeted to disadvantaged workers.
5. Programs based on mixed strategies—including training, various supports and services, financial incentives, and better access to employers—have worked well, especially in an environment where the pressure to get a job is strong.

Promising approaches that are not yet formally evaluated include sectoral strategies, efforts to build career ladders, and those that improve employers' human resource policies. Other supportive public policies might also include higher minimum wages, greater support for (or less opposition to) collective bargaining, tax credits for companies that recruit and train the low-skilled, and TANF or WIA performance bonuses for states that improve retention and advancement rates. These policies could be parts of comprehensive efforts by the federal or state governments to encourage the creation of more jobs at firms that offer higher wages and advancement opportunities for less-educated workers, rather than merely to ration a

fixed number of better jobs across a larger number of deserving applicants. ■

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<sup>1</sup>R. Blank and L. Schmidt, "Work, Wages and Welfare," in *The New World of Welfare*, ed. R. Blank and R. Haskins (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>G. Acs and P. Loprest, *Leaving Welfare: Employment and Well-Being of Families That Left Welfare in the Post-Entitlement Era*, Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, Kalamazoo, MI, 2004, and "Who Are Low-Income Working Families?" paper prepared for the Working Families Roundtable, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2005; P. Schochet and A. Rangarajan, *Characteristics of Low-Wage Workers and Their Labor Market Experiences: Evidence from the Mid- to Late 1990s*, Mathematica Policy Research, Washington, DC, 2004.

<sup>3</sup>The extended analysis is presented in H. Holzer and K. Martinson, "Can We Improve Job Retention and Advancement among Low-Income Working Parents?" IRP Discussion Paper 1307-05, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005.

<sup>4</sup>H. Holzer and R. Lalonde, "Job Stability and Change among Less-Educated Young Workers," in *Finding Jobs: Work and Welfare Reform*, ed. D. Card and R. Blank (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>G. Hamilton, *Moving People from Welfare to Work: Lessons from the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies*, Final Report to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC, 2002; H. Holzer, M. Stoll, and D. Wissoker, "Job Performance and Retention among Welfare Recipients," *Social Service Review* 78 (2004):343-69.

<sup>6</sup>F. Andersson, H. Holzer, and J. Lane, *Moving Up or Moving On: Who Advances in the Low-Wage Labor Market?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., H. Holzer, S. Raphael, and M. Stoll, "How Willing Are Employers to Hire Ex-Offenders?" and D. Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," both in *Focus* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 40-46.

<sup>8</sup>Other efforts to provide better financial incentives to low earners, beyond the programs we discuss here, include the Jobs Plus program in low-income public housing projects. See H. Bloom, J. Riccio, and N. Verma, with J. Walter, *Promoting Work in Public Housing: The Effectiveness of Jobs Plus*, MDRC, New York, 2005.

<sup>9</sup>Fourteen states and the District of Columbia have also implemented state EITCs (K. Ross Phillips, *State Policies That Affect Working Families*, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2004). See also N. Eissa and J. Liebman, "Labor Supply Response to the Earned Income Tax Credit," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 111 (1996): 605-37.

<sup>10</sup>G. Berlin, *Encouraging Work, Reducing Poverty: The Impact of Work Incentive Programs*, MDRC, New York, 2000.

<sup>11</sup>T. Gladden and C. Taber, "Wage Progression among Less-Skilled Workers," in *Finding Jobs: Work and Welfare Reform*, ed. D. Card and R. Blank (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000).

<sup>12</sup>Evidence that temp agencies can improve the access of low-income workers to higher-wage employers is summarized in Andersson, Holzer and Lane, *Moving Up or Moving On*. Other recent evidence on this issue appears in D. Autor and S. Houseman, "Temporary Agency Employment as a Way Out of Poverty?" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper, 2005. The latter paper, based on data from one welfare-to-work office in Michigan, finds that the positive employment effects of temp agencies faded over time, though those achieved by other welfare-to-work intermediaries were more persistent.

<sup>13</sup>A. Rangarajan, *Keeping Welfare Recipients Employed: A Guide for States Designing Job Retention Services*, Mathematica Policy Research, Princeton, NJ, 1998.

<sup>14</sup>This multistate project is being managed by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services. For further information, see the Web site: [http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/opre/welfare\\_employ/employ\\_retention/index.html](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/opre/welfare_employ/employ_retention/index.html)

<sup>15</sup>K. Martinson and J. Strawn, *Built to Last: Why Skills Matter for Long-Term Success in Welfare Reform*, Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, DC, 2003.

<sup>16</sup>The generally modest investments in such training generated comparably modest increases in earnings—R. Lalonde, “The Promise of Public Sector Training Programs,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 9 (1995): 149–68; and see also J. Bos, S. Scrivener, J. Snipes, G. Hamilton, and others, *Improving Basic Skills: The Effects of Adult Education in Welfare-to-Work Programs*, MDRC, New York, 2001.

<sup>17</sup>J. Burkhardt, A. Rangarajan, A. Gordon, and E. Kisker, *Evaluation of the Minority Female Single Parent Demonstration*, Volume 1, *Summary Report*, Mathematica Policy Research, Princeton, NJ, 1992. More recent efforts to replicate CET in other locations have also been evaluated by MDRC, and look less positive, at least partly because the control groups received community college training at high levels.

<sup>18</sup>C. Uggen, “Work as a Turning Point in the Life Course of Criminals: A Duration Model of Age, Employment, and Recidivism,” *American Sociological Review* 65 (2002): 529–46. And see G. Kirby, H. Hill, L. Pavetti, J. Jacobson, and others, *Transitional Jobs Programs: Stepping Stones to Unsubsidized Employment*, Mathematica Policy Research, Washington, DC, April 2002. A new evaluation of programs for the hard to serve, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is now under way.

<sup>19</sup>G. Hamilton, “The ACHIEVE Program: A Unique Model for Promoting Retention at the Workplace,” presented at the Annual Research Conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, New York, October 2004.

<sup>20</sup>A.-E. Duke, K. Martinson, and J. Strawn, *Wising Up: How Government Can Partner with Business to Increase Skills and Advance Low-Wage Workers*, Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, DC, 2006.

<sup>21</sup>R. Moore, D. Blake, G. Phillips, and D. McConaughy, *Training That Works: Lessons from California’s Employment Training Panel Program* (Kalamazoo, MI: Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2006).

<sup>22</sup>M. Conway and I. Rademacher, “Sector Strategies: A Synthesis of Findings from the Aspen Institute’s Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project,” unpublished report, Aspen Institute Washington DC, 2004.

<sup>23</sup>R. Giloth, *Workforce Intermediaries for the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004).

<sup>24</sup>On the Jobs Initiative, see the Casey Foundation Web site, at <http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/fes/jobs/>. CEO is one of several strategies for the “Hard to Employ” that is being evaluated by MDRC for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

# IRP-USDA Small Grants Program

The Institute for Research on Poverty and the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture have since 1998 sponsored a competition that provides small grants for research on poverty and food assistance programs. The intent of the competition is to stimulate new areas of interest in research on programs such as Food Stamps, school lunch and breakfast programs, the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Information about the competition, including current and past recipients, and guidelines for application, is on the IRP Web site at <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/initiatives/funding/usdasgp.htm>

## Reports from grant recipients, 2004–05

### Local-Level Predictors of Household Food Security

*Judi Bartfeld and Lingling Wang*

The prevalence of food insecurity varies substantially across states; most of this variability is accounted for by differences in the demographic composition as well as the economic and policy contexts of states. Food insecurity is not merely an indicator of economic hardship but rather the result of a more complex interplay among personal resources, public resources, and the economic and social contexts in which a household resides. This study examined factors affecting food security among households with elementary school children in Wisconsin, focusing on several components of the food security infrastructure, including housing, transportation, food outlets, nutrition assistance programs, and local labor markets. The full report will appear as an IRP Discussion Paper.

### Why Did the Food Stamp Caseload Decline (and Rise)? Effects of Policies and the Economy

*Caroline Danielson and Jacob Alex Klerman*

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is intended to help low-income households afford a nutritionally adequate diet. Since 1990, the FSP caseload has varied widely—rising sharply in the early 1990s, dropping sharply in the late 1990s, and then rising again in the early 2000s. Welfare and food stamp policy changes, as well as the changing economic climate, are plausible candidates for explaining the path of the caseload over time. We estimated the effect of these three factors. We found that welfare reform and the improving economy explained all of the FSP caseload decline during the late 1990s, and that policies aimed at increasing access to the FSP and the weakening economy explained about half of the FSP caseload increase in the early 2000s. The full report appears as IRP Discussion Paper 1316-06.

### Dynamics of Material Hardship in the Women's Employment Study

*Colleen M. Heflin*

I examined the dynamics of specific forms of material hardship, analyzing data from five waves of the Women's Employment Study (WES) concerning six different forms of material hardship (food insufficiency, telephone disconnection, utility disconnection, unmet medical needs, improper winter clothing, and housing problems). Although the cross-sectional reports of material hardship were comparable to those found in other studies, the level of women ever reporting each form of hardship was substantially higher in the WES. Furthermore, women were likely to experience multiple forms of hardship over the observation period, suggesting that overall quality of life within these households was quite low at some point(s) during the transition from welfare to work. The full report appears as IRP Discussion Paper 1315-06.

### Assessing the Association among Food Insecurity, Child Feeding Practices, and Obesity in Low-Income Latino Families

*Patricia Crawford*

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of past and current maternal food insecurity on child feeding practices that encourage weight gain among children in WIC-enrolled families. Knowledge about factors influencing child feeding practices is relevant to WIC nutrition educators, who educate mothers about effective child feeding strategies. Rates of child overweight in this pilot study population exceeded the national norms for low-income Hispanic 2–5-year-olds by more than 100 percent (40 percent versus 17 percent). However, this convenience sample of WIC-eligible urban and rural mothers of 2–5-year-old children is not representative of either California or urban and rural low-income Latino populations. We found few parenting differences between past and current food-insecure mothers. The study's sample size was small and multiple tests done on the data could have created some false-positive findings. However, there were trends among mothers who reported experiences with *past food insecurity* that suggest possible differences in factors associated with obesity. Past food-insecure mothers tended to be less likely to be obese than mothers who had not experienced childhood food insecurity. Among past food-insecure mothers, there was a tendency for mothers to be less likely to believe that their children should eat all of the food on their plates. They also had a tendency to be more likely to serve their children larger portions of some foods, notably orange juice and corn. In addition, they were less likely to worry that their children ate too much. The full report will appear as an IRP Discussion Paper.