



Focus

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Does temporary agency employment offer a way out of poverty?

Although temporary agencies account for a small share of U.S. employment, they employ a disproportionate share of minority and low-skilled workers. State administrative data show that between 15 and 40 percent of former welfare recipients who obtained employment after the 1996 welfare reforms took jobs in the temporary help sector. This article summarizes recent work by David H. Autor and Susan N. Houseman that uses quasi-experimental data from a Michigan welfare-to-work program, “Work First,” to determine whether temporary agency employment provides an effective means for poor and disadvantaged workers to improve their employment prospects and, ultimately, increase their odds of escaping poverty.

Temporary agency jobs could potentially help low-skilled workers, particularly the unemployed, to build skills and later transition successfully into stable employment. Alternatively, the short-term positions typically provided by temporary help agencies may not be conducive to building skills and job contacts. Moreover, spells of temporary employment could divert individuals from engaging in productive searches for stable, longer-term employment. While both of these contrasting scenarios are surely correct in specific cases, what matters most for welfare-to-work policy is which scenario predominates among the low-skilled workers targeted by government programs.

The Conclusions

Autor and Houseman use a natural experiment that results from welfare-to-work participants being randomly assigned to welfare service offices that are more or less likely to encourage employment with temporary agencies. The evidence from this quasi-experimental approach suggests that short-term benefits from temporary agency employment do not persist, and that over the longer term—a year or more—participants placed in temporary jobs are no better off than if they had received no job placement at all.

<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc243a.pdf>

Race and poverty: Divergent fortunes of America’s children?

Daniel T. Lichter, Zhenchao Qian, and Martha L. Crowley

In this article, researchers examine racial differences in child poverty rates, exploring how economic growth in the 1990s affected different groups of children. The racial and ethnic composition of the United States has changed dramatically since the 1950s, while child poverty has increased substantially, particularly in the past three decades. This increase was accompanied by dramatic changes in family structure; in the 1960s, most poor children lived in families with married parents, but by the end of the 1990s more than half lived in single-mother families. The child poverty rate peaked during the 1993 recession, dropping by the end of the 1990s to the lowest level in 20 years. However, this overall decline disguises different patterns among subgroups of children. Poverty rates declined modestly for non-Hispanic whites and Asians, but more dramatically for African Americans and Native Americans. Despite the large declines, these historically disadvantaged groups still had the highest child poverty rates in 2000.

The Conclusions

The results suggest that economic and employment growth in the 1990s was responsible for most of the decline in child poverty. In contrast to earlier decades, when changes in family structure such as the shift from married- to single-parent families affected child poverty rates, few changes in children’s living arrangements occurred during the 1990s.

Although maternal employment was an important factor in lower child poverty rates and higher family income during the 1990s, high poverty rates for minority children cannot be completely explained by differences in employment rates or mothers’ work patterns.

While the family incomes of the poorest children increased at a similar or faster pace than those of other children during the 1990s, the dollar amount of the income gap between poor and affluent children increased. The researchers argue that faster progress towards racial economic equality can only be achieved by breaking the link between childhood and adult poverty through improved education, a secure safety net, or more economic opportunity.

<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc243b.pdf>

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Welfare reform as a failed political strategy: Evidence and explanations for the stability of public opinion

Joe Soss and Sanford F. Schram

In the 1990s, an influential group of political actors argued that, by reforming welfare and making aid recipients “play by the rules,” the Democratic Party could shed an electoral liability, free poverty politics from the crippling effects of racial resentment, and create a public-opinion environment more favorable to antipoverty efforts. In these investigations, researchers tested the prediction that welfare reform would change the contours of American public opinion. The researchers review evidence suggesting that this prediction largely failed and present a general set of theoretical propositions that explain the weak effects.

The Conclusions

The researchers find some evidence that policy reform neutralized welfare as a salient object of public concern. Nevertheless, survey data suggest stability in Americans’ views of welfare. For example, there was no significant change in the percentage of Americans who ascribe poverty to lack of effort or in the percentage who believe welfare recipients could do without the benefits they receive. Similarly, the researchers found no change in the tendency of whites who opposed efforts to “raise the living standards of blacks” to also oppose efforts to “raise the living standards of the poor.”

After 1996, opposition to improving the standard of living for poor Americans actually *increased* significantly, as did public opposition to reducing income differences between the rich and the poor. Those who opposed welfare spending were significantly more likely to oppose helping the poor in 1984–1991, and this relationship became slightly *stronger* in the 1998–2004 period.

The “end of welfare as we know it” did not make Americans more willing to spend on the poor, on blacks, or on welfare, and it was actually followed by a decline in the public’s desire to reduce inequality and raise living standards for the poor. Although “the welfare issue” has become less salient, the basic configuration of public perceptions that existed under AFDC remains in place under TANF.

The case of welfare reform does not cast doubt on the idea that policy changes can move public opinion. Rather, it helps to clarify the circumstances under which such changes are likely to occur. When a policy change touches few citizens’ lives in a direct manner, when it reinforces values that already prevail, when it leaves intact the structure of the current policy regime, and when it is framed in terms that resonate with prevailing stereotypes, the authors argue we should not be surprised if the policy change fails to shift entrenched public opinion.

<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc243c.pdf>

In March 2005, IRP held a conference, “Qualitative Approaches to the Study of Poverty and Welfare Reform: Current Challenges,” that brought together scholars from around the country who are doing state-of-the-art qualitative research, practitioners in policy evaluation firms, and IRP’s own substantial group of qualitative researchers. Presentations were on four areas in which qualitative researchers have made contributions and face challenges: the mapping of complicated family networks, the documentation of livelihood strategies, the dynamics of welfare provision, and analyses of neighborhoods and local organizations. The qualitative articles that appear in this issue represent recent work by researchers who participated in the conference.

After welfare reform: You choose your child over the job

Lisa Dodson

The research summarized in this article uses interview and focus group data from several studies to examine mothers’ strategies for providing for the care and safety of their children while holding low-wage jobs. Welfare reform changed the playing field for low-income families who had previously relied on public assistance to meet family needs. After employment became a primary focus of welfare programs, poor women increasingly turned to the labor market to make ends meet. This research provides insight into the challenges and decisions faced by wage-poor mothers, as well as their responses to those obstacles.

Dodson argues that mothers working in low-wage jobs are guided by a form of “moral economy,” the idea that a job should provide a livelihood that allows them, first and foremost, to care for their families. When low-wage jobs fail to meet this basic condition, these mothers choose children over jobs and thus challenge contemporary norms of work behavior. The studies, which included a diverse group of women, revealed similar problems and common strategies. Mothers reported ongoing conflicts between the requirements of their jobs and the needs of their families, and described numerous creative approaches to these issues, including bending or breaking work rules in order to care for their children.

Most respondents had a positive attitude toward having a job and a desire to financially support themselves and their family. Mothers expected their wages to provide a living, but also expected their jobs to provide them with the means to protect their children’s best interests. For many mothers, this led to defiance of the restrictions of their jobs when these restrictions conflicted with the safety of their children. Such refusal of labor-market terms often came at a price; many of the respondents had been disciplined at work, and many had lost jobs. Working-poor mothers are often described in negative terms, as deficient workers known for tardiness, absenteeism, and lack of a work ethic. This research describes these workers in different terms, as parents who see contemporary work structure as anti-child, inhumane, and thus immoral, and who strive to defy this structure in defense of their children.

<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc243d.pdf>

Observation in poverty research

Susan T. Gooden

Caseworker-client interaction is a vital component of any welfare program, because workers provide the link between the client and the program, and in their actions may affect clients' likelihood of economic self-sufficiency. Very little of researchers' knowledge of this interaction is based on direct observation. This article uses an example from a Midwestern welfare program study to illustrate the effectiveness of observation to understand caseworker-client interaction.

The observational study allowed researchers to directly examine how clients and caseworkers related to each other during the implementation phase of a new welfare program. They were able to address several questions related to whether the program was implemented as intended. What aspects of the program are explained, and do these match policymaker and agency administrator expectations? How are caseworkers making decisions about assessments and placements? Do clients experience the same program differently?

These observations yield information that can be very helpful for program administrators. For example, the study described in this article suggested that because of competing demands on a caseworker's time, it may be unrealistic to expect that they be simultaneously available for telephone inquiries and face-to-face interviews—as official policy required. Observation can also be used to describe how clients actually experience a program, and compare that to what was intended.

Observation may show that a program was not implemented as intended, complicating any evaluation of program effectiveness. The author argues that the difficulty of adjusting for implementation issues may reduce evaluators' appreciation for observation research and thus contribute to its relatively rare use. More work is required in order to devise methods that allow program evaluators to effectively incorporate findings from observation.

<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc243e.pdf>

New perspectives on the social and economic contexts of HIV/AIDS infection

In the United States, rates of HIV/AIDS infection are now rising disproportionately among low-income black men and women. Researchers are just beginning to ask how they can best address the complex social, economic, and cultural contexts of this epidemic for economically disadvantaged groups and for racial and ethnic minorities. This article reports on work by two recent IRP visitors. Rucker Johnson, an economist and public policy scholar, explored the incidence of infection among black women and men in conjunction with the higher levels of incarceration among black men. He and his colleague Steven Raphael approached this question through an innovative quantitative analysis of national panel data. Sociologist and qualitative researcher Celeste Watkins-Hayes considers how little we know about the experiences of HIV-positive black women in three crucial areas: employment, family dynamics, and intimate relationships. This *Focus* article summarizes her perspectives on work and economic issues.

Incarceration and HIV/AIDS. Between 1980 and 1996, male and female AIDS infection rates increased the most among demographic groups that experienced the largest increases in male incarceration rates. The strength of this observed relationship increased with time, paralleling the time between HIV infection and the emergence of full-blown AIDS. That is, an increase in incarceration at one point generated very few new AIDS cases immediately and an annually increasing number of cases over the next ten years or so. The higher incarceration rates among black males over the period of study explain the lion's share of the racial disparities in AIDS infection rates between black women and women of other racial and ethnic groups.

During the 1990s, infection occurring through heterosexual sex, not intravenous drug use, was the largest contributor to the growth of the racial disparities in HIV infection rates among women. Among men, the increasing black-white disparity in homosexually contracted AIDS infections is fully accounted for by the higher incarceration rates of blacks, providing further evidence of the link between incarceration and AIDS. Johnson and Raphael also examined the effects of state prison overcrowding litigation and the effects of intrastate changes in sentencing and parole regimes in order to test the robustness of their findings. The results suggest that prison release rates and state prison-sentencing policy reforms had highly significant effects on subsequent AIDS infection rates, and provide further support for the hypothesized relationship between incarceration and AIDS infection rates.

Women Living with HIV/AIDS. How do women fulfilling multiple roles as workers, family members, and intimate partners structure their lives after HIV diagnoses? The growing feminization of the worldwide epidemic, says Watkins-Hayes, only strengthens the argument that understanding social and economic factors is essential to the analysis of risk, prevention, and treatment. Much of the previous research has explored the psychological impact of HIV infection. The opportunities and restrictions that emerge from race, class, and gender status, from social affiliations and commitments, and from economic circumstances should also be addressed by research. Studies of individual behavior and experiences should explicitly consider the structural and historical contexts of people's lives, making it possible to draw out larger sociological and epidemiological meanings while respecting human complexity and individuality.

Watkins-Hayes argues that to craft effective policy and program initiatives, HIV/AIDS research that has largely focused on the employment experiences of HIV-positive white males who are relatively advantaged socially and economically must be integrated with the sociological and economic research that focuses on the employment experiences of disadvantaged women. She explores some tools at the disposal of researchers who tackle so complex a topic: longitudinal analysis; ethnographic work that integrates interviews and observation; mixed-method work that encourages researchers to quantify social dynamics while providing texture to investigations through the words of subjects and the observations of researchers; and comparative work that opens up the possibility of understanding how individuals in different communities and cultures fashion their lives after an HIV diagnosis.

<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc243f.pdf>

Focus

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