



Inadequate Programs Assisting Mothers in Poverty

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There are many different issues facing the American welfare system. One of the fastest growing concerns is that of young mothers in poverty. This concern grows as the teen pregnancies and out of wedlock births rise, and as women gain their financial independence. "The number of single-parents with children under the age of 18 doubled from 3.8 million in 1970 to 9.4 million in 1988, and single-parents now make up 27% of all family groups with children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989)" (Fox Folk 277). One of the major concerns of young mothers in poverty is that of child care. There is a tremendous need for adequate, reliable, cheap childcare. The problem is that there is really no good inexpensive means of caring for children while the mother works.

In this paper I plan to examine reasons why women are becoming teen mothers in poverty at an increasing rate, what is being done to curb this epidemic (primarily in the areas of child care, training and education, and social and emotional support), and what the repercussions are for the children.

Many of my ideas about the welfare system stem from *Social Welfare* by DiNitto (2000). The chapter on implementation helped me realize all of the complications associated with development and practice

of new social policies. However, chapters four, six and eleven on "Preventing Poverty," "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families," and "Racism and Sexism," respectively, made me take a new view on how unfair and inadequate our bureaucratic, capitalist system is. The video we watched on single mothers in poverty (*Poverty Outlaw*) helped to tie all of this together and highlight the problems facing young mothers in poverty. If we do not set up a dependable, positive welfare plan for these women soon, they and their children are doomed to poverty by society.

Many causes surround the issue of why women often become young mothers in poverty. The first is that they were born into poverty and/or were raised, themselves, by single mothers. This correlation tends to be truly apparent in poor urban minority groups. "The probability of an unmarried teenager giving birth increases for those girls who experienced disruptive events in childhood, those whose mothers themselves gave birth prior to marriage and those whose mothers lack education. Girls are also more likely to have children out of wedlock if their own mothers obtained welfare" (Chong-Bum et al. 1995) Another major factor is lack of education. Many young mothers drop out of school when they become pregnant, leaving them to either face jobs with inadequate pay and no benefits on which to raise a family, or attempt to go to school or get a G.E.D.—which requires childcare. A final reason why these women enter and remain in poverty is a lack of a positive support system—which should include caring individuals to emotionally and psychologically support them in the areas of childcare and housework as well as to supplement their income. This epidemic is spreading; "current data show that public assistance to support welfare dependents now touches 14 million persons in the United States... Of these, about 95 percent of adults on welfare are single mothers... 56 percent of whom live in

central cities” (Ntiri 34).

Changing views in America have caused much confusion in the ideals of the traditional family. As we change our ideal of what the family consists of, from a husband and wife raising their children, to a myriad of possibilities usually revolving around a mother and her children, we also begin to change our expectations of a mother. We used to believe a mother took care of her children physically, emotionally, psychologically, and cognitively. Now we expect that either the mother does all of that *and* financially support herself and the child, or that the aforementioned areas be taken care of by child care centers while the mother pays for the child care and supports the child and herself financially.

In her article, “The Transition of Female Heads of Household from Welfare to Work: Implications for Adult Education,” Daphne Ntiri quotes a passage from the *Michigan Law Review* which discusses this as it relates to welfare reform, specifically with recent cut back and reforms to *AFDC*.

There is anger toward welfare mothers for staying at home and taking caring of their children... [This] contradicts traditional women’s roles: Women are supposed to stay at home and take care of children. Ironically, the purpose of the mother’s pension laws and at least in part for the first thirty years of *AFDC*, was to enable women to stay at home with their children and remain Homemakers (Cahn 969).

Ntiri goes on to explain how conservatives often tend to abandon our traditional ideals of the role of a mother when it pertains to welfare recipients on the basis of their perception of the recipient’s poor morals, laziness, and promiscuity. There also is some fear that helping these women to stay at home and raise their children dis-

courages a work ethic and sense of self-sufficiency. However any mother who raises a child has a work ethic in order to raise her child; furthermore, if adequate childcare were available wouldn’t most mothers choose to work and properly care for their families?

In “When Dreams Die and Resources Fail: The Social Support Systems of Poor Single Mothers,” Marion Wijnberg and Susan Wienger quote women in this situation, who are describing what it is that they want.

‘I don’t want to be dependent on *AFDC*: I want to be able to depend on myself’... I want to ‘be able to take better care of my family,’ ‘become financially stable and support myself and my children,’ ‘make a contribution to myself and my community,’ ‘have bills paid, save a little money, have some leisure time,’ ‘feel better about myself and my decision to have a child’” (Wijnberg et al. 79)

So why is it that these women are viewed as having such different beliefs than they actually do? It seems as though it is strictly to place blame. For decades we have expected mothers to raise their children and tried to give them all the support necessary to do so. Now we tend to believe that because these women can’t fit our changing ideals of what their responsibilities are, they are inadequate and unworthy of assistance. Even if this were true it shouldn’t mean depriving their children of much needed financial, medical, emotional, and educational supports.

Even those mothers who do meet all the requirements the government feels they should aren’t achieving adequate benefits for their children. Of full-time mothers (those working forty hours a week) most report an additional twenty to thirty hours spent on housework (for a total of up to

seventy hours of work per week) and only 7 to 10.5 hours spent with their children. This information was reported in the article "Single Mothers in Various Living Arrangements: Differences in Economic and Time Resources" (Fox Folk 1996). The study found that overall, the best living situation was for the mother to live with the grandparents; other favorable living arrangements included any in which the mother lived with a supportive, trustworthy family member, friend or mate. Benefits from cohabitation included some financial supplementation, mostly a sharing of household duties, childcare, lower levels of stress and more time for leisure or sleep. When mothers lived with their parents the opportunity and desire to continue their education was higher, however, the emotional support perceived by the mothers was less than that given by other options for cohabitation. Furthermore the financial supplementations in minority families were less (attributed to lower minority wages), and help with household chores by persons other than the mother (including help from the children) was higher on an average of five percent. Single mothers have difficulty in juggling time, money, and child rearing. "Researchers who have compared single-parent mothers to married mothers have documented the lower economic status, higher stress levels, and lack of time for sleep and leisure among single-parent mothers, as well as the negative consequences of these stresses on their children" (Fox Folk 277).

As was discussed earlier, children who grow up in a house dependent on assistance or in a stressful home life are more likely to wind up on public assistance themselves. We need to establish a positive role model to encourage a good work ethic as well as responsibility in children, in order to prevent them from repeating their parent's situation. The best way to do that would be to have a happy, healthy, responsible, employed parent with good self-es-

teem. The best way to achieve this is through education for better employment on the part of the parent; yet, the government makes it nearly impossible for a parent to return to school especially with the new reforms requiring a welfare recipient to accept the first job offered to them or risk losing the supplements to their income. No one could return to school if it meant starving their children, yet it's difficult to appropriately raise a child for many moms in poverty without going back to school. "...Having a high school diploma was the most powerful influence increasing the probability of living above the poverty line" (Fox Folk 285). Despite all the evidence to show how essential for survival, advancement, and for creation of a positive role model good employment is, there are not very many government programs encouraging education for better employment.

Another issue for those women who find employment in order to get off of public assistance is that often the work they obtain requires childcare, which is difficult to find. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 forced a lot of people to become employed before they were ready for or in a job that did not fit their life-style. This along with the growth of the service economy as well as the growth of the population of elderly has caused a new wave of jobs requiring "nondaytime," weekend, and holiday workers. These fields need employees to be available any day, any time, day or night. "Low-educated mothers are disproportionately represented in occupations with high rates of nonstandard schedules" (Presser et al. 33). This poses a problem for single parents. Adequate, affordable childcare is very difficult to find. Add to that a need to have childcare available during nonstandard hours and days and the result is very limited and expensive options. If the single parent is cohabiting with a person (most often a grandparent) who is willing and capable

of altering their work schedule to assist with childcare, the two might “split shifts;” wherein they alternate working schedules to insure that one person will be there for the children. Studies have shown that “the odds of living in poverty are more than twice as great when nonemployed parents ... report concerns about child care that keep them from looking or applying for jobs than when nonemployed parents report no such concerns.... children are an important consideration for low-educated mothers in determining their employment schedules” (Presser et al. 26). Although these women strive for the best opportunities possible for their young children, they often run into roadblocks, such as the need for childcare or a better education.

In the article “The Effect of the Price of Child Care on AFDC Mothers’ Paid Work Behavior,” Jutta Joesch highlights the cause and effect relationship of work and childcare. “A lack of adequate child care in the short-run reduces the percentage of working mothers and/or the number of hours they work. In the long run, sporadic, employment and limited work experience resulting from lack of child care make it more difficult for mothers to take advantage of job promotions or training necessary for advancement, and thus, may have consequences for women’s professional success” (Joesch 161). Without proper assistance they may never advance, resulting in repetition of a life in poverty for their children. In order to stop this cycle we must supply those in need with all the tools necessary for advancement while continuing proper childcare; this would require parent education, government funded childcare, income supplementation, and job placement.

Beside the obvious need for childcare there are other needs that should be met to insure the best possible development of the child of a teen parent on public assistance. Children of these women seem to have more difficulties socially and in school than other children do. “Children of teenage

parents are more likely than children of older parents to experience developmental difficulties during their early years and, when they enter school, their educational achievement tends to be lower... The most salient characteristics of the least successful teen parents include very low levels of family and social support, poor school performance and depression” (Cherniss et al. 72). So there is proof that the conditions created by poverty and teen pregnancy are not conducive to proper development; however this may not be just due to economic factors.

A lack of proper support may lead to depression and it is very difficult to get out of depression without support. To increase the level of support available to single parent families in poverty, a recent study provided intervention and therapy in the areas of communication, roles, and intergenerational patterns. This intervention seems to have the greatest impact on the quality of parenting but did little to improve the life conditions overall. Although many of the women became pregnant again and remained on welfare, they learned to be more responsive and involved in their children’s lives. It is also noteworthy that “although the school drop out rate did not improve over time, it did not get worse, which is often the case in other programs serving this population” (Cherniss et al. 77). In this program the mother’s triumph was in being better prepared to raise their children, resulting in a better chance for those children not to repeat their parents’ mistakes.

Each of the programs and proposals that have been examined so far help to alleviate some of the pressures on the single parent family in poverty; yet there is no all encompassing plan to help these people become completely self-sufficient and capable of positively affecting their children. There needs to be a combination of all of these supportive techniques available for those who need them. Furthermore each individual needs to be viewed as such. Every

situation and each person's response to that situation is different, we need to take this into consideration when implementing a plan for a family. We must consider many personal aspects of each person and their interpersonal relationships in order to most appropriately devise a system that they can benefit from both now and in the future. There needs to be a combined assistance effort in the areas of health care, child care, child education, psychological well-being, parent education, social support systems, and job placement. If only one area is missing we seem to see a deficiency in the achievement of continual family self-sufficiency.

One assistive technique that has been used is income packaging. In "Income Packaging as a Survival Strategy for Welfare Mothers," Kristine Miranne discusses how women have learned to combine all of their possible means to create an income appropriate for family survival. Welfare mothers would combine pay from minimum wage jobs, with supplementary welfare money and child support from the father in order to make it from week to week. Although these women are working and supporting their families, there is not much progress for them. They remain in the same minimum wage job, don't further their education and don't improve themselves as role models for the development of their children.

The rationale of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), Miranne argues, is that the only mechanism that will allow recipients of AFDC to progress from dependency to self-sufficiency is to become employed. "The assumption is that earned wages, even if from low income or temporary jobs, will enable poor women to move their families off the welfare roles and out of poverty." (Miranne 211) However, she continues to add that the focus on immediate job placement "ignores several critical factors that should frame any discussion on

welfare reform" (Miranne 211). In an economic system based on expected class mobility we accept these women to remain in these minimum wage jobs, with no improvement of education or training, scraping together odd bits of supplementary income in order to not only survive but to pay for child care so that she can work a low paying job. No one should be expected to lose the chance to better her/himself because we can't afford to give them their basic human rights.

Furthermore, the success of women in the workplace affects her self-esteem and sense of competence. Whether or not a woman can keep her job affects her self-esteem; therefore in a position where she takes repeated temporary employment, with scattered bouts of unemployment, her self-esteem will drop and so will her chances at job advancement in her next job. "Welfare reform legislature discourages women from going to college; instead it urges them to take the first job made available. Thus women are likely to find themselves in low paying and low skilled jobs, where they have little opportunities to advance" (Ntiri 37).

"Keeping the Show on the road: Female Headed Families Surviving on \$22,000 a year or Less in New York City" (Francis-Okongwu 1996) reports on women who actually try to overcome the odds to increase their income. Even minimal increases often resulted in termination of at least one of the following benefits: Medicaid, subsidized housing, other types of subsidies, or food stamps. In order for one to get ahead they need to maintain or decrease their spending and increase their income. Isn't it illogical to believe that these women will get ahead by having their spending increased every time their income is increased? "Data suggest that welfare reform policies designed to force mothers of young children into the labor force without adequate preparation for stable, living wage jobs, or comprehensive

child care for young and school age children, will have a deleterious intergenerational impact on current and future life chances of these families” (Francis-Okongwu 115). Again we see that without further efforts today, this problem is likely to grow tomorrow.

Another basic factor continually affecting the welfare system and employment opportunities is the stock market and the availability of low skill manufacturing jobs. As we have seen in the past few months the stock market is ever declining, resulting in fewer jobs and due to further industrialization manufacturing jobs are becoming less available. Women are more greatly affected by these trends than any other population. “...Women are the majority of involuntary part-time workers and two thirds of the temporary workers. About two thirds of minimum wage workers are women, and the percent of women employed in low wage jobs increased from 15% to 21% between the mid 1970’s and the mid 1980s” (Parker 168). These percentages show that these effects take a great toll on the population of young mothers in poverty. With the ever-decreasing availability of minimum wage jobs it is of increasing importance to support these women until such a time when they have acquired proper education and training to advance in job placement.

If these trends continue, these women will soon be out of work and on the streets. Currently, reforms like those that took place in 1996 through 2000 (like the change from Americans Families with Dependent Children to Temporary Aid to Needy Families) are viewed as being positive. Although it is currently too early to tell, the number of welfare recipients has decreased. However, it may be at the cost of an increase in our homeless population. “...During Michigan’s winter of 1997, there was a reported 50% increase in the homeless shelter traffic. Advocates for the poor attribute this to cuts in food stamps and other subsidies to drug addicts, along with

inadequate housing” (Ntiri 38). The results may not yet be blatantly apparent, but soon we will see how turning our poor away forces them onto the street resulting in high crime rates and added difficulty to the possibility of recovery.

This topic affects me in my choice of occupation. As a social worker or childcare personnel I will see this increase in poverty for young mothers. With certain accommodations I may be able to help the families that I come in contact with. Also it is now apparent that the government needs to increase its welfare spending in order to educate people, to get them on their feet, and to help dam this tidal wave of welfare poverty.

I have a utopian sort of a proposal for young mothers in poverty—one that I believe is both economical and feasible. What if we were to use current vacant housing by first making it livable, and then inviting young mothers and their children to live in them? The homes should also be staffed with social workers so that support is available when needed. The next step would be to give each woman a schedule depending on her individual situation and goals. She should have part-time employment and education or job training. This schedule will be completed with group meetings, time spent with children, education and therapy in the home for social assistance, stress management, depression relieving techniques, interaction techniques, and child rearing techniques. Another attribute of their schedule can be a cooperative effort by all the women to insure that at least one person is at home to care for the children at all times. The income of the women should be supplemented if necessary; however if they are working, even just a little, they should have enough spending money to survive. By living in this sort of temporary housing these women can be afforded free room and board and they and their children can live without fear of losing basic necessities like heat.

Furthermore, I feel we should offer Medicaid to each family while in the program. Once a woman has achieved her personal goals she may stay with the program to assist other young mothers, who are experiencing similar difficulties, by relating to them and counseling them if properly trained. A program such as this should be federally funded, possibly through raising liquor and tobacco taxes, and by increasing penalty fines for federal crimes. It would also be possible to start the building of these homes by employing the homeless or even by using an inmate reform program; staffing may begin with volunteers if available. This idea may be utopian, but if it gives a better chance of survival for families and an increase in upward mobility for the least fortunate—not to mention a chance for children in poverty—isn't it worth at least a seed funding to prove its value in practice?

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Films:

- "Poverty Outlaw" [videorecording] / produced and directed by Pamela Yates, Peter Kinoy in association with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union. Published: New York, N.Y.: Skylight Pictures, c1997. Description: 1 videocassette (60 min.): sd., col.; 1/2 in. Documentary from the point-of-view of Philadelphia welfare recipients, showing some of the devastating effects of welfare reform. Chronicles the growth of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, a group of welfare recipients organizing to protest the cuts in their benefits and to work toward better living conditions for poor people who live in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. VHS.