

Welfare mothers are trapped in unstable low-wage jobs that do not provide enough income or fringe benefits to support their families.

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APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES

IS WELFARE REFORM HELPING MOTHERS ACHIEVE ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE?



In 1996, the federal government enacted Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the most significant change in American social policy since the Great Depression. TANF reinvented the social welfare system by requiring single mothers to work for their income assistance. It also imposed a lifetime limit on benefits, allowing individuals to utilize the welfare system for a maximum of five years. **Claudia J. Coulton, Ph.D.**, the Lillian F. Harris Professor at Case's Mandel School of Applied Social Science, together with her colleagues, has been studying the experiences of women on welfare since the onset of welfare reform. As co-director of the Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, Dr. Coulton works with community-based organizations to address poverty in urban neighborhoods, with a particular focus on local and regional issues.

According to the research completed by Dr. Coulton and her colleagues, welfare-to-work programs have achieved mixed yet encouraging results. The good news is that the number of single

mothers receiving public assistance has been cut in half since the reforms were put into place. In addition, most women who have left the welfare system are working in unprecedented numbers and are receiving more income. The bad news is that the women are not earning enough to raise themselves and their children out of poverty.

Dr. Coulton recently completed a five-year longitudinal study of 1,200 Ohio families that left the welfare ranks and a study of employment trends. The research found that welfare mothers typically do not have the skills to earn competitive wages. Therefore, they are trapped in unstable, low-wage jobs that do not provide enough income or fringe benefits—health care, vacation, sick time, day care, and disability insurance—to support their families. The situation has worsened to some degree during the current recession, with many of these low-skilled workers suffering through long periods of unemployment.

Dr. Coulton's research team recommends that lawmakers enact new public policies that will provide better support to the working poor, including government subsidized health insurance and childcare. They also recommend public investment in labor-market advancements, including on-the-job training, career counseling, and job placement services. "Welfare-to-work programs have helped single mothers reach the first rung of the employment ladder," notes Dr. Coulton. "Our research provides government officials and advocacy groups with the knowledge they need to make the right decisions that will help these women climb higher to more stable, secure, and better paying jobs."

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