

Introduction

This work is about American single mothers and poverty. Gender is a major determinant of poverty in the United States. The most recent available data published by the U. S. Census Bureau confirms this fact.¹ In 2003, women were over forty percent more likely to be poor than men and they accounted for sixty percent of the American adult population that was extremely poor, meaning with income less than half of the standard poverty level.² Also, data shows that in 2003 families headed by single women were twice as likely to be poor than families headed by single men.³

In 2003, there were 3.9 million single indigent mothers in the United States.⁴ For these women and their dependent children, life was a daily struggle to afford even the most basic necessities such as shelter and food, the use of a laundromat, or a bus fare.

In August of 1996, the United States Congress passed a Welfare Reform bill that replaced the existing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with a \$16.5 billion annual block grant to the states called

¹See United States Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2003*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p60-226.pdf>

²See Legal Momentum, *Reading Between the Lines: Women's Poverty in the United States, 2003*, 2. Available at <http://www.legalmomentum.org/womeninpoverty.pdf> The U.S Census Bureau measures poverty by comparing annual incomes with the poverty standard which the federal government created in the 1960s and updates annually for inflation. Currently, the federal poverty standard in the 48 contiguous states and in the District of Columbia is set at \$9,800 a year for a one-person family, at \$13,200 for a two-person family, at \$16,600 for a three-person family, and at \$20,000 for a family of four. Slightly higher yearly income levels apply for residents of Hawaii and Alaska. See United States Department of Health and Human Services, *The 2006 HHS Poverty Guidelines*, 2. Available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/06poverty.shtml>

³See Legal Momentum, *Reading Between the Lines: Women's Poverty in the United States, 2003*, 2.

⁴See United States Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2003*, 13.

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The reach of the new welfare program is broad. As of August 1, 2006 TANF has served 1,051,094 women and their 3,372,741 children.⁵ The program's goal is both startling and controversial, to move welfare recipients out of the welfare rolls and into the labor market, thereby helping them to make the crucial transition from welfare dependency to self-sufficiency. Accordingly, employment or enrollment in job-training programs have become requisites for the receipt of benefits, and "welfare-to-work" requirements are implemented after 24 continuous months on assistance.

Highly publicized government statistics report that between the summer of 1996 and the spring of 2001, the volume of the national welfare caseload dropped from 12.2 million recipients in 4.4 million families to 5.5 million recipients in 2.1 million families.⁶ Unfortunately, the fact that 5.7 million names had been struck from the nation's welfare lists did not mean that the government was winning the war against poverty. Indeed, it meant quite the opposite. In fact, a closer look at those same statistics revealed that twenty percent of the former welfare recipients had not only been removed from the caseloads, they had literally disappeared.⁷ Because they were not receiving disability payments, were not employed, or did not have a working spouse, they simply had left no footprints in the system. Presumably, they were out there somewhere, getting by on soup kitchens and survival skills.

For those recipients who had not disappeared, life did not come easy either. In January of 2000, over three quarters of the families receiving welfare assistance were experiencing serious hardship, while a third of them was experiencing critical hardship defined as being evicted, having utilities disconnected, running out of food and cash way before the end of the month, and having to rely on emergency rooms as the only source of medical care.⁸

The main purpose of this research work is to use a gender lens to identify and investigate the causes for persistent, widespread poverty among single mothers in the United States. The data used in the course of the inves-

⁵For quarterly updates concerning the total number of TANF recipients see, United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of family Assistance, *Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Separate State Program-Maintenance of Effort Aid to Families with Dependant Children. Caseload Data*. Available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/caseload/caseloadindex.htm#2000>

⁶NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, *Welfare and Poverty. Welfare Reform: After Five Years Is It Working?* (New York: NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2002).

⁷See K. Rodgers, "Target Poverty, Not Welfare," *USA Today*, Monday, August 20 2001, 14A.

⁸NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, *Welfare and Poverty*.

tigation and presented here comes from a large variety of published and unpublished materials including books, peer review articles, law reviews articles, case law, and tabulations of data from surveys conducted by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), the United States Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Children's Bureau (CB), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Women's Law Center (NWLC), the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund (NOWLDEF), the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (NCPTP), the California Wellness Foundation, and the California Women's Law Center (CWLC).⁹ In addition, interviews with indigent women, mainly borrowed from secondary sources, such as books and peer review articles, are used to help the reader understand how poor women perceive themselves and how poverty is lived.

Chapter 1 of this work serves as an introductory chapter. It provides the reader with a deeper understanding of critical concepts and phenomena that are referred to in the following chapters. The first section of Chapter 1 traces a brief history of American social welfare policies from the beginning of the twentieth Century to the present day. This brief recount illustrates how race, class, and gender stereotypes have informed the implementation of a number of social welfare policies in the United States. The remaining two sections of Chapter 1 discuss media representation of welfare-reliant women. In particular, they illustrate to what extent media imaging of welfare recipients has played a role for the translation of race, class, and gender stereotypes into social welfare programs of which single mothers are the only beneficiaries in the United States. To clarify the way in which the media portray welfare mothers, Section 1.2 of Chapter 1 reconstructs the case of Clarabel Ventura, a single mother of seven residing in the Boston area. The treatment of Clarabel's dramatic story is of great significance because it epitomizes the stereotyped, one-dimensional approach that the media commonly use to report on all welfare women's stories.

In the months preceding the enactment of the Welfare Reform bill, the language utilized by the American media to describe women on welfare did tend to draw divisions between bad mothers and innocent children. Both in television broadcasts and in the press, indigent women were often described as "welfare queens," sluggish breeders and reckless mothers incapable to take good care of their children. Sadly, the use of these epithets does not represent an exception, rather it represents the norm. Over the last seventy

⁹Further information concerning the nature and mission of these organizations will be provided later in different sections of this work.

years, the American public has been educated to consider welfare recipients as part of an underclass who lives in urban ghettos, has an exorbitant number of children, and possesses no desire for a permanent job. By concentrating on dramatic stories, like Ventura's, that are almost exclusively based on the desperate actions of marginalized individuals, and by omitting equally pervasive counterstories, the media choose to ignore the diversity of behaviors and attitudes that characterizes welfare mothers.¹⁰ In an effort to make poor women's voices heard, and to describe welfare mothers at a depth and objectiveness well beyond the media representation, Chapter 1 closes with a brief but significant collection of conversations with eight indigent single mothers drawn from a poll of 372 respondents, residing in four different U.S. cities, and interviewed by authors Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein between 1988 and 1992. These excerpts shed light on the reality of welfare women's everyday life, and on their worries and difficulties. Under this light, welfare recipients appear as what the majority of them truly are, caring, loving mothers, who to the best of their abilities spend their time and limited resources to raise their children.

Chapter 2 discusses the first cause for widespread poverty among single American mothers, the implementation of punitive social welfare policies informed by race, class, and gender stereotypes. The opening section of the chapter argues that the Welfare Reform bill is a typical example of media-informed social policy based on discriminatory criteria. Because cash benefits under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program were reserved exclusively to single mothers and their children, many Welfare Reform supporters have argued that over time AFDC became a disincentive to marriage and an incentive to out-of-wedlock childbearing among poor women. As a consequence, three provisions¹¹ were attached to the final version of the Welfare Reform bill. Under the rubric of "personal responsibility" these three provisions reach deeply into the morality of American single mothers in a blatant attempt to modify both their sexual behavior and reproductive choices. The Bonus to Reward a Decrease in Illegitimacy provision allocated \$400 million for the period 1996-2003 to be awarded to the five states that reported the highest decrease in the number of out-of-wedlock births and abortions. The Abstinence Education provi-

¹⁰See L. A. Williams, *The Ideology of Division: Behavior Modification Welfare Reform Proposals*, 102 Yale L. J. 719 (1992), 725; L. A. Williams, *Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers: How the Media Discourse Informs the Welfare Legislation Debate*, 22 Fordham Urb. L. J. 1159 (1995), 1169.

¹¹The provisions in question are, the Bonus to Reward a Decrease in Illegitimacy provision, the Abstinence Education provision, and the Child Exclusion provision.

sion made \$500 million available each year to all fifty states and the District of Columbia to establish educational and outreach programs that promote abstinence as the only suitable way to avoid unwanted pregnancies for all individuals who are not married. Finally, the Child Exclusion provision allowed states to deny additional cash assistance to mothers who bear further children while on welfare.

Sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 of Chapter 2 describe the nature of the Illegitimacy and the Abstinence Education provisions in detail.¹² A more substantial section of Chapter 2 is dedicated to the discussion of the Child Exclusion provision and of its effect on the lives of welfare recipients. For this analysis, Chapter 2 utilizes extracts from interviews with welfare-reliant mothers residing in New Jersey and in California. In the course of these interviews, women were asked to describe how the Child Exclusion provision, as implemented in their states, had affected their lives and the lives of their children. Interestingly, the accounts given by these women share some common traits. For example, all respondents reported having serious difficulties making ends meet. Also, they all felt trapped in a vicious cycle that kept them poor despite their strong desire to transition off welfare. The chapter proceeds by examining findings from state evaluations of Child Exclusion policies in an attempt to determine to what extent, if at all, the Child Exclusion provision affects childbearing attitudes and practices among the welfare population.

Chapter 2 closes with the description of two of the most stunning idiosyncrasies of the Welfare Reform. As previously mentioned, conflicting data describing the results of the 1996 Welfare Reform bill are the currency of the day. Depending on what news source is chosen, the Welfare Reform appears as either a dazzling success or a great failure. Similarly, while it is undeniable that the welfare-to-work requirements have been effective in moving recipients back into the labor market – in fact, more current and former recipients are working than ever before,¹³ the real question is at what cost. In an attempt to answer this question, the closing section of Chapter 2 recounts a real-life story featured in the April 2001 issue of *The New Yorker*. It is the story of Miss Cookie, a former welfare recipient and a mother of three, who like many others comes home tired from work only to get ready for her second shift, a second job that she needs to have in order to afford a living for her family. The concept of the second-shift mom, which refers to the many welfare mothers who juggle more than one job, brings into

¹²An even more minute analysis of the Abstinence Education provision is provided in Chapter 5, Section 5.3.2.

¹³A. Weil, “Where is Welfare Reform Heading?,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Friday, September 22 2000.

prominence two major paradoxes of the Welfare Reform. First, contrary to the government's expectations, employment does not necessarily equal economic self-sufficiency. Because former recipients are almost always hired in low-wage jobs, once they enter the labor market they often become working poor, that is individuals who have spent at least 27 weeks in the labor force, either working or looking for work, but whose incomes fall below or slightly above the official poverty line.¹⁴ Far from representing economic security, such a level of income places the working poor at constant risk for public assistance. Second, overworked single parents are unable to provide their children with a safe environment in which to grow. As a matter of fact, welfare-to-work requirements and the second-shift-mom phenomenon have contributed to create a crowd of unsupervised children with no after-school activities and at the mercy of street violence.

Chapter 3 discusses the second cause for persisting indigence among single mothers, the limited availability of affordable quality child care. Shortage of affordable quality child care causes three problems. First, it contributes to underemployment because job options to single parents are greatly reduced when affordable child care is not made available to them. Second, parents in low-wage jobs are forced to spend debilitating portions of their small wages on expensive child care slots. Third, scarcity of good-quality child care arrangements relegates children of low-income families to poor quality child care settings, thereby compromising children's academic and social potentials, and placing them at risk of delinquency and welfare dependency. In the years prior to the Welfare Reform of 1996, there was already a scarcity of affordable quality child care in the United States for those living below or near the poverty line. Welfare-to-work requirements for welfare recipients have exacerbated the existing shortage. As a result, the current demand for subsidized or low-cost child care among eligible welfare families and the working poor far exceeds the supply.

Chapter 3 opens with a brief history of federal funding for child care. It then describes the different types of child care arrangements currently available to all working families. In an attempt to assess the total volume of affordable child care arrangements available to low-income families in the five years prior the 1996 Welfare Reform, Section 3.3 of Chapter 3 analyzes values and fluctuations in the three key players of the child care market, supply, affordability, and quality. Then, Section 3.4 illustrates the radical

¹⁴United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *A Profile of the Working Poor, 2000* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2002). Available at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpswp2000.htm>

changes in federal financing for child care brought about by the Welfare Reform. To determine if such changes have alleviated the shortage of low-cost child-care slots typical of the quinquennium 1990-1995, Section 3.5 evaluates statistics pertaining to availability, affordability, and quality of child-care arrangements in the years following the Welfare Reform.

The analysis of the pre- and post-Welfare-Reform child care markets is enriched by interviews with welfare-reliant mothers. In these interviews, welfare women tell about the difficulties they have encountered when purchasing child care, and about the many incredibly inventive solutions they have come up with to overcome their inability to afford child care for their children. Chapter 3 closes with a discussion of the negative effects of child-care shortage on both parents and children.

Chapter 4 investigates the third reason for single mothers' persistent hardship, the restricted access to reproductive health care services to indigent women. This chapter argues that in addition to welfare policies that punish poor single mothers for having children while on welfare, indigent women's ability to control both their reproductive destiny and their dependency on public assistance is increasingly undermined by the merging of Catholic and secular hospitals.

Chapter 4 opens with the discussion of the nature and scope of recent merger trends between religious and non-religious hospitals. It then proceeds with a description of mergers' impact on the lives of poor single mothers. When religious and non-sectarian facilities merge, women's reproductive health is held hostage by the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, which prohibit a wide array of reproductive services, including contraception, sterilization, and abortion. As demonstrated by the real-life stories recounted in Chapter 4, women who are poor or on the edge of poverty often have no way to prevent or resolve an unintended pregnancy because they cannot afford to pay for contraception or abortion on their own.

Frequently, indigent women not only have difficulties paying for the procedure, but also covering the additional expenses often associated with getting to a clinic or to another facility at which reproductive health care services are provided. According to The Alan Guttmacher Institute, a quarter of all poor or low-income women lives in non-metropolitan areas.¹⁵ Those areas have experienced the most significant decline in non-religious health

¹⁵P. Donovan, *The Politics of Blame: Family Planning, Abortion and the Poor* (New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1995), 4.

care providers in recent years.¹⁶ As a consequence, women must travel a long distance to obtain reproductive health care services. Traveling can entail child-care costs, overnight accommodation costs, and transportation expenses that the majority of poor women simply cannot afford.

Chapter 4 closes with a description of the advocacy work that different non-profit organizations have done since 1996 in order to stop or reduce the incidence of hospital mergers throughout the United States both at state and federal level. Common base for this kind of advocacy work is the recognition that for many low-income women the ability to attain long-term economic security hinges on their power to avoid giving birth when they are financially unable to support a child.

Chapter 5 discusses the fourth factor responsible for single women's indigence and welfare dependence, the incidence of teenage pregnancy among low-income adolescents. Chapter 5 opens with an analysis of the nature of public policies currently dealing with teenage pregnancy in the United States. The U.S. have the highest rate of adolescent pregnancy in the Western industrialized world. The frequency of this phenomenon is particularly high among poor, minority teenagers living in low-income communities.

The Welfare Reform bill targets what it views as the main cause for adolescent pregnancy, teenagers' tendency to engage in premarital sex. Accordingly, the Abstinence Education provision allocated millions of dollars to teach adolescents to abstain from sexual activity and to educate them about the ineffectiveness of birth control methods to protect them from unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). However, as discussed in the first half of Chapter 5, premarital sex is not the only issue at stake. Current research proves that early childbearing occurs in social environments that lack access to meaningful education, boast high unemployment, and are riddled by poverty.

Since 1996, the federal government has designated a disproportionate percentage of its budget each year to the implementation of policies that target teenage sex and pregnancy exclusively. Chapter 5 suggests that the federal government should instead invest money to implement strategies able to transform the hopeless, discouraged, and empty lives that adolescent pregnancy has come to denote. More specifically, Chapter 5 argues that the federal government should enforce measures able to reduce the incidence of pregnancy among young adults and to provide parenting teenagers with economic security and a positive outlook for the future. Such measures should address six critical policy issues that have been overlooked so far, (i)

¹⁶Ibid.

the need for more systematic research on the causes of adolescent pregnancy, (ii) the necessity to secure minors' access to birth control information and methods, (iii) the importance of improving educational opportunities for teenagers and of reducing high school drop-outs, (iv) the need to protect the rights of pregnant and parenting teens enrolled in secondary education programs, (v) the importance to provide parenting students with subsidized child care services, and (vi) to allow girls' participation in physical education activities as a tool to prevent adolescent pregnancy.

Chapter 5 closes by recounting the story of Desiree Wintrago, a 16 year-old mother from Los Angeles, who, like many others of her peers, describes pregnancy as a way to infuse with hope an otherwise harsh and gloomy life.

