CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY SAN MARCOS

THESIS SIGNATURE PAGE

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MAster of ARTS

IN

SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE

THESIS TITLE

TOWARD “REAL” WELFARE REFORM: THE VOICES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS ON WELFARE

AUTHOR:  SHARON M. CULLITY

DATE OF SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE:  MAY 23, 2001

THE THESIS HAS BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE.

Linda Shaw, Ph. D.
THESIS COMMITTEE CHAIR (TYPED)

Donald Barrett, Ph. D.
THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER (TYPED)

Kristin Bates, Ph. D.
THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER (TYPED)
Toward "Real" Welfare Reform: The Voices and Lived Experiences of Parents on Welfare

California State University San Marcos

5/30/01

Sharon M. Cullity

Research Committee
Linda Shaw Ph.D.
Donald Barrett Ph.D.
Kristen Bates Ph.D.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is dedicated to all the courageous parents who shared their lives with me in order to make changes for those who are standing behind them. I’ll never forget your voices.

To Joni Halpern and SPIN, for tirelessly advocating to end the injustices poor parents face every day.

My classmates, especially Michelle, who always had words of encouragement and always let me vent.

Dale, my study partner, my confidante, my friend. I’ll never forget our inspiring conversations about how we are going to change the world. I couldn’t have made it through this without you.

To Dr. Kristen Bates, who was always willing to listen and offer me her smiling face.

To Dr. Don Barrett, thank-you for being open and allowing me to do it my way. I think we taught each other something through this process.

To my family of friends- Noni, Mary, Suzanne, Cidia, Dee Dee, Janet and Carol.

To Tyler, only one week old and all the children whose future we hold in our hands.

My sister, Colleen, who sat beside me through it all and always knew I could do it. I love you. Now we both have one.

To my husband, Frank. I did it baby. Thank you for allowing me to be so fractured, frantic, and crazy. You never faltered in your devotion. You are my rock. Now we can finally go to the movies again.

And finally, and most importantly, to Dr. Linda Shaw, who tirelessly mentored me and encouraged me to be the best I could be, especially when I doubted myself. You always made me feel so smart and never hesitated in your support. You inspired me and helped me to see that what I was doing really mattered, and to always remember who and why I was doing this work to begin with.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to understand the impact of welfare reform from the perspective of the parents living through it. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) ended “welfare as we know it.” Welfare as we know it, was an assumption based on the argument, accepted by many, that the very programs designed to help poor people have made them reliant on public aid. To understand the consequences of welfare reform, I observed and interviewed parents from SPIN (Supportive Parents Information Network), a welfare rights advocacy group. This research provides a unique sociological perspective on the experiences and impacts of welfare reform on parents as they live through this important shift in policy toward poor parents and families on welfare. By including the voices of poor parents, who are rarely heard in the debate over public support of the poor, this research contests claims for the success of TANF that are based solely on reducing the welfare rolls, while not seeking to reduce poverty. It also, disputes and implicates social scientist who perpetuate “deficit model ”assumptions about poor people.
INTRODUCTION

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) brought profound changes to the lives of parents living in poverty who receive AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). The PRWORA converted welfare from a Federal entitlement program to a state-administered block grant, Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), with time limits on the receipt of cash aid and mandatory work requirements. Amid increasingly negative public sentiment against growing welfare rolls and the widely held beliefs that poor people on welfare either do not know how or refuse to help themselves, candidate Bill Clinton promised in his 1992 presidential campaign to “end welfare as we know it.” Reversing decades of public policy regarding government intervention on behalf of the poorest members of society, the role of government under welfare reform is now to teach poor parents and children that they must make it on their own without the safety net of public assistance.

Policy makers have drawn upon the work of both conservative and liberal social scientists in crafting contemporary welfare reform (Lewis, 1968, Mead, 1986,1987, Moynihan, 1965, Murray, 1984, Wilson, 1987). While they differ in the particulars, these social scientists all largely agree that welfare recipients have failed to assume identities and learn roles based on the dominant ideology of what constitutes a good mother, a responsible parent, or a self-sufficient person. The
underlying message is that welfare parents need to be monitored, regulated, and controlled. Public policy and welfare reform are the instruments of this control.

Citing a 47% reduction in welfare caseloads, politicians and the media have declared welfare reform to be a glowing success (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 8/22/00). But, what has become of the poor parents who have left the welfare rolls? How has welfare reform affected the hopes of those struggling to become self-sufficient? Missing from the research informing welfare reform policy is the voices of the parents who are living through welfare reform. My research is a qualitative observational and interview study of the lived experiences of women as they deal with welfare reform. The purpose of this study is not to judge or elevate the lives of welfare parents, but rather to understand from an insider’s point of view how welfare parents cope and experience welfare reform and its impact on their lives. Are poor parents who leave welfare finding jobs that lead to self-sufficiency, and if so, what are the social conditions that accompany this successful outcome? Or, do they experience more stress in their lives and find themselves sinking further into poverty?

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Social policies have consequences in people’s lives, and welfare reform impacts many lives. My long-term commitment to fighting poverty and inequality based on race, class, and gender led me to investigate welfare reform and its consequences for poor parents and their children. I wanted my research to inform
policy makers and the public about what it is like to live through welfare reform from an insiders' standpoint. In addition, I wanted to combine my role as an activist with my role as an academic to produce research that would serve those within the community who are seeking empowerment and social change.

In my search for opportunities to observe and collect data on the lived experiences of women as they deal with welfare reform, the Director of SPIN (Supportive Parents Information Network), a welfare rights advocacy organization in San Diego, told me about a research project that SPIN was undertaking to document the impact of welfare reform on poor parents. The purpose of the research was to produce data that would assist SPIN in advocating before social service providers, the media, and the general public. In addition to collecting data, the Director wanted SPIN members to not simply be research subjects but active participants in the research process. One of the purposes of SPIN is to build community among its members, and SPIN members want to interview each other “so we could get to know the families and they could feel more like they were part of us” (interview with SPIN member, October 10, 2000). The Director of SPIN, Joni Halpern, and SPIN members have discussed the need for parents to see their commonalties and be able to embrace the community they form. Therefore, my research would be a collaborative effort in the tradition of Participatory Action Research (PAR) that would seek to empower and assist in making SPIN parents agents in their own lives.

SPIN is an 800-member advocacy group made up of low-income parents who help each other to achieve self-sufficiency. Within its general membership, the
organization has four active groups that work to empower women and to make their voices heard: 1) Board of Directors, 2) Legislative Committee, 3) Planning Committee, and 4) Advocacy Group titled Parents Representing Parents: A New Model of Personal Advocacy. Though SPIN members are involved in these groups, participation in a group is not usually the initial reason for parents' involvement with SPIN. Most parents discover SPIN when a problem arises having to do with welfare personnel, sanctions, and appeals. Parents involved with SPIN learn that they do not have to “be ashamed to be on public benefits.” Together, they learn that they have choices about the direction of their lives, work activities, and training (SPIN News, 1999).

Many, if not most, welfare parents maintain a belief in upward mobility and the American Dream, and work hard to make ends meet (Edin and Lein, 1997). Welfare reform was supposed to “end welfare as we know it,” and it has. Some welfare parents are benefiting from this policy while others are losing ground by being pushed into low-paying, temporary, or dead-end jobs. Of the parents who are living through welfare reform, SPIN parents are coming together to make their voices heard when the rights of poor women and children are violated.

The purpose of the project is to produce a report that will document what it is like to “live welfare reform.” A report that can be used by SPIN members to advocate on their own behalf. SPIN members want policy makers to understand that they can no longer make “welfare and other social policy concerning families without listening to the voices of those who are most deeply affected by those policies” (SPIN News,
1999). This research provides the opportunity to work with the parents as a researcher, to participate in SPIN activities, and to help parents to recognize their power as a group through consciousness raising activities and team participation in data collection. My contribution is to continue to assist SPIN members in their fight against the war on welfare, against attacks on single mothers, and against the welfare reform practices that impact their lives.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the past two decades, income inequality has escalated in the U.S. and so has the number of people on welfare (Handler and Hasenfeld, 1997, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). The argument, accepted by many, is that the very welfare programs designed to help poor people have also made people reliant on public aid. This belief provided support for current welfare reform legislation, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), which ended Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) and, with it, cash aid as a Federal entitlement. AFDC was replaced by Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), a Federal program administered by states that limits cash benefits to no more than two consecutive years, five years in an adult recipient’s lifetime, and imposes a mandatory work requirement. Failure to adhere to these requirements can result in sanctions and loss of benefits. (California continues to provide benefits to children). These changes were made possible by widely held
public images of the poor as immoral and dependent people who must be forced to adhere to a work ethic.

Much of the scholarship that addresses the issue of welfare has focused on issues of dependency, using notions of individual weaknesses to account for poverty. A number of scholars have attributed poverty and welfare dependency to a "culture of poverty" based on family structure and intergenerational transmissions of dependency traits. By contrast, scholars working in Marxist and feminist traditions who employ structural arguments, focus on ups and downs of capitalism, the labor market, and gender and racial inequalities to account for poverty and reliance on welfare. These latter scholars, however, have been ignored in current welfare reform which continues to use images derived from scholars for whom poverty and welfare are moral issues, a matter of values and individual behavioral choices, a way of life. In what follows, I will discuss the literature in which such views of the poor are based and the ways that the images of the poor are reflected in welfare reform policies. I will focus on the debate over welfare reform with a particular emphasis on how social scientists have contributed to current welfare reform legislation.

Assumptions of Dependency: Values, Choice, and the Culture of Poverty

The belief that welfare is harmful to values and promotes "behavioral dependency" predates the American welfare state with roots in the English Poor Laws (Handler, 1995). According to this view, the problem of welfare dependency arises from the values of the individual recipient rather than from the larger social and
economic system. From this perspective, poor single parents choose welfare because they lack the correct moral values: they get pregnant, have children out of wedlock, and would rather stay at home to raise children because they are irresponsible and lazy. Other stereotypes include images of welfare recipients spending welfare checks on luxuries while letting their children go hungry, generational welfare dependency (Lewis, 1968, Moynihan, 1965), and welfare recipients “lazing about” rather than getting a job (Solinger in Mink, 1999). These so called “bad choices,” based on individual traits of welfare parents constructed as pathological, are key assumptions of the welfare dependency literature (Mead, 1986, Moynihan; 1965, Murray, 1984).

Culture of poverty theorists seek to explain the persistence of poverty and welfare dependency by saying that people are poor and on welfare because they are more accepting of out-of-wedlock births, possess deviant values, and lack a willingness to work. These values not only characterize the present generation but come to characterize cultural values that are reproduced and passed from welfare-reliant mothers to their children (Moynihan, 1965, Lewis, 1968). Transmission of “generational” traits such as fatalism, resignation, and idleness, (in direct opposition to the American values of hard work, self-reliance, and individuality) keep people in poverty (Marshall, 1996).

Issues of family structure and urban poverty are key elements in culture of poverty theorist Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s controversial report, The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965) that attempted to explain the high proportion of persistent poverty among Black families. Moynihan notes that while the Black
community is characterized by a middle-class group that is prospering, a disproportionately large portion of Black families remain “disorganized and disadvantaged” (1965). Moynihan argues that a “disintegration” of the Black family, reflected in a large number of family break-ups, female-headed homes, out-of-wedlock births, and welfare dependency among urban Blacks, is the central problem plaguing the Black lower class. While acknowledging that these problems stem from patterns of racial oppression that began with slavery and were sustained by years of discrimination, Moynihan primarily faults the poverty in the Black ghetto on unstable patterns of family life and the “matriarchal” family that fails to pass values to children. According to Moynihan (1965), this lifestyle perpetuates itself over the generations to become a “tangle of pathology.”

The problem of families that do not conform to patterns in the dominant culture (i.e., a married man and woman raising a family) are central to Moynihan’s argument. He therefore advocates that the federal government make it policy “to strengthen the Negro family so as to enable it to raise and support it’s members as do other families” (Moynihan, 1965). By focusing on the “pathology” of the matriarchal family, Moynihan’s research perpetuates the belief that poverty is located in the behavior of poor people rather than in the social organization of the larger society.

Moynihan’s explanation of dependency is similar to Oscar Lewis’s notion of the culture of poverty. Based on fieldwork among Mexican families, Lewis argues
that the poor, when driven into economic marginality by a capitalist society, tend to form a “culture of poverty.”

Lewis argues that feelings of despair and hopelessness accompany poor people’s realization of the “overwhelming odds” against achieving success in terms of the values and goals of mainstream society because of the separation from the political process. This results in special adaptations to existing external circumstances that include passivity, feelings of powerlessness, and fatalism. Feelings of inferiority, because of society’s “contempt and aversion” for the poor, and the “creation of female-headed families because of the inability of poor men to be adequate breadwinners,” also characterize the poor (Lewis 1968, 188). This culture is passed down from generation to generation as children “absorb the basic values and attitudes” of their subculture and are unable to “take advantage” of “increased opportunities” that occur during their lives (Lewis, 1968).

A more contemporary version of the “culture of poverty” is presented by William Julius Wilson (1987), who seeks to explain the rise of deviant behavior among the urban poor. Wilson points to a host of structural forces that have taken manufacturing jobs and middle-class residents from central-city neighborhoods, resulting in poor people who lack job opportunities and lack middle-class role models and institutions. Because residents of these neighborhoods have less contact with mainstream norms than in previous decades, they are more likely to adhere to values of the deviant subculture. Although Wilson frames his explanation in structural terms, his point of view is nevertheless consistent with dependency and culture of
poverty literature because he emphasizes the failure of urban poor to absorb white middle-class values deemed to be normative.

Charles Murray (1984), another contemporary poverty theorist, believes that by providing support to poor mothers, the welfare system has created incentives that encourage the formation of “non-traditional” families. Murray blames the welfare system for increases in out-of-wedlock births and families headed by single mothers increase dependency, violence, crime, illiteracy, and a host of other social ills. Murray’s focus on “non-traditional” families gained widespread support during the Reagan administration. In spite of major criticism from other social scientists, (Danziger and Gottschalk, 1985; Ellwood and Summers, 1984; Greenstein, 1985; Jenks, 1985), Reagan used Murray’s “scientific” study to sharply curtail access to welfare benefits. Yet, rather than reducing out-of-wedlock births, these measures had the opposite effect: poverty deepened, homelessness increased, and cities became more impoverished (Bernstein, 1995).

Like Murray, Lawrence Mead (1986) views the poor as dysfunctional and unable, if not unwilling, to pull themselves out of poverty. Like others writing in the culture of poverty tradition, Mead maintains that single women on welfare have transferred their dependency from men to the state (Lewis, 1968, Mead, 1986, 1997, Moynihan, 1965, Murray, 1994). Mead argues that the poor differ from the non-poor because they do not work as much, and this situation is exacerbated by the failure to obligate recipients of social welfare programs to behave according to mainstream norms. By not requiring anything in return for benefits, the underclass remains
socially isolated and removed from middle-class society (Mead, 1986, Murray, 1984). But, rather than less government involvement in the lives of the poor, Mead calls for a “new paternalism” that would impose behavioral standards on the poor. Since poverty arises from the deviant values and behavior of individuals, the government should manage poor peoples lives because they are unable to do it for themselves. Government assistance should only be provided in exchange for increasing control.

Mead focuses on the personality traits of welfare recipients while ignoring the inability of the economy to provide the poor opportunities for job training or work that pays a living wage. He focuses on attitude change instead of economic transformation and fails to note that a postindustrial economy has left many people pessimistic about the possibility that working hard at a dead-end job will be their passport out of poverty (Schram, 1995). Rather than emphasize a lack of economic opportunity in the work force, Mead remarks that “unlike us, the poor are remarkably unresponsive to...economic incentives” (1986). Mead suggests that because poor women on welfare are unable to make reasonable choices on their own, they should be controlled.

**Structural and Feminist Assumptions**

Focused on gender and racial inequalities, feminist and Marxist scholars draw upon structural arguments to explain poverty and reliance on welfare. In their classic work, *Regulating the Poor*, Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1993) take a Marxist perspective to argue that poverty serves a functional role in a capitalist
society. During times of economic downturn, negative images of welfare recipients accompany cutbacks in benefits and public degradation. The scorn and regulation of the lives of the poorest in society sends a strong message to the working poor that unless they persist in their low-paying, low-status positions, they will meet a similar fate. Also writing in the Marxist tradition, Stanford F. Schram (1995) states that economic factors are “pushed to the background” when social policy history is “rewritten” to stress welfare dependency as the cause of poverty. In this view, when dependency explanations move cultural characteristics to the foreground, “symptoms” of poverty become causes, and coping practices a culture of poverty (1995, 120).


The concept of patriarchy is central to a feminist analysis of the welfare state. Abramovitz (2000) argues that patriarchy refers to the unequal distribution of power between women and men enforced by the ideology of gender roles. Women heads of single-parent families who do not conform to gender role norms are therefore discredited. Feminists scholars also contest dominant definitions of “work” and their relationship to “welfare” (Abramovitz, 2000, Boris in Mink, 1999, Edin and Lein, 1997, Mink, 1999). Mink, for example, argues that the problem is not that something
is wrong with poor single mothers, but rather that something is wrong with a system that devalues and obscures women’s child-rearing “work” (Abramovitz, 2000).

Feminists challenge dependency explanations by arguing that women use welfare support to “survive” the inequality they face in response to race and gender discrimination in the workplace (Abramovitz, 1996, Edin and Lein, 1997, Mink, 1998, Pearce, 1990, Quadagno, 1994). Pierce (1990) states that welfare is not a social problem but a source of income to single mothers whose economic chances are constrained by the many ways that racism and sexism structure economic life in the United States. Abramovitz (1996) posits that regulating the lives of women through welfare reform moves beyond concerns with discrimination to demonstrating how welfare policy functions to reinforce the entire social system of women’s subordination, particularly their constraints within the family and dependency on men. Welfare policies function to keep women dependent on men, while men are dependent on economic wages and “personally” dependent on women staying in their place. The implicit solution for helping poor women’s income seems to be to find them a “breadwinner” husband.

Some second wave feminists who oppose enforced domesticity see joining the labor market as a sign of liberation. Yet, these feminists ignore the fact that joining the labor force has rarely been a choice for poor women or for women of color (Abramovitz, 1996, Quadagno, 1994). Other feminists argue that social policies requiring time limits and mandatory work outside the home ignore the work already
being done by women in the home and further marginalize poor women on welfare who must join the labor force.

These feminists argue that a new definition of work must be embraced that not only includes the un-paid labor of “motherwork” but also refocusses public discourse from a debate over work to a debate over an adequate income. This view shifts the question of welfare policy from, “Are you working?” to “Are you earning enough to raise your children in dignity?” (Boris in Mink, 1999:37). In this society, mothers are unpaid workers. If they are poor and single, they are workers uniquely “at risk “ for falling into poverty. Even though their occupation is “essential and highly praised,” if they pursue it “seriously,” they still find themselves in economic straits (Mink, 1998).

The inclusion of a feminist analysis of women and poverty is crucial to demonstrate the necessity for poor parents to rely upon welfare as a survival strategy in response to economic and political conditions that threaten their children and families (Abramovitz, 1996, Edin and Lein, 1997, Mink, 1998, Quadagno, 1994, Pearce, 1990, Schein, 1995).

Legislative Assumptions and Current Policy

Growing resentment over the past two decades toward single mothers who rely on public assistance has fueled public debate and given rise to calls for an end to welfare as an entitlement and for a mandatory work requirement for poor parents (Edin and Lein, 1997). Responding to the rising tide of public sentiment to bolster their political agenda to “end welfare as we know it,” policy makers have drawn, both
implicitly and explicitly, on the images and assumptions about poor people on welfare found in the writings of liberal and conservative social theorists.

The links to “outsider” social scientists’ scholarly beliefs are clearly found within the current welfare reform legislation which mandates workfare, time limits on receipt of cash aid, and marriage for single parents. Under welfare reform, parents must work a minimum of 32 hours per week, are limited to 24 months of consecutive and five years of lifetime benefits, and are provided no increased benefits to children born after the implementation of welfare reform. An assumption based on the work of theorist Charles Murray is that these measures are necessary because previous programs such as AFDC, which entitled poor parents to a safety net, merely encouraged welfare dependency. Murray calls for replacing welfare as an entitlement with forced work and time limit disincentives for collecting welfare. Welfare reform also incorporates culture of poverty assumptions (Moynihan, 1965, Lewis, 1968) that posit that welfare recipients are more accepting of deviant values that lead to welfare dependency, and that welfare mothers transmit a set of values to their children that devalue marriage, work, and self-sufficiency.

Mead’s (1986,1997) notion that government needs to control welfare parents’ lives by mandating work as a duty and as a moral and public obligation are all also found in the current reform bill. By forcing work and punishing single parenthood, the government will take over the socializing role for welfare recipients and dissolve the culture of poverty among poor families. The government must set standards for its recipients since they are unable and unwilling to do it themselves.
The “success” of TANF, based on a 47 percent reduction in the welfare rolls, occurred during a strong economy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). A number of women who were most able to leave TANF had already done so rather than face time limits and sanctions (Abramovitz, 2000; Horton and Shaw, 1999). Others approaching their time limits for receipt of cash aid were forced into the low wage labor force. Those who remain on the welfare rolls often face numerous obstacles such as gender discrimination, child care, transportation, lack of training, and low-wage dead end jobs (Abramovitz, 2000, Edin and Lein, 1997, Handler and Hasenfeld, 1997, Mink, 1999).

Moreover, while both women of color and white women have moved off welfare in large numbers, women of color are not leaving as quickly due to the racial discrimination. Even as welfare recipients move into the low-wage labor force, they will continue to suffer from race and gender discrimination. These issues are not addressed in current welfare reform policy (Abromowitz, 2000, Handler and Hasenfeld, 1997, Mink, 1999, Piven in Mink, 1999, Quadagno, 1994, Schram, 1995).

Numerous studies focus on the contributions of the conditions of work in a postindustrial economy to rising rates of poverty and welfare dependency (Abramowitz, 1999; Edin and Lein, 1997; Handler and Hasenfeld, 1997; Piven and Cloward, 1993; Quadagno, 1994; Schram, 1995). Drawing upon a Marxist analysis of the poor in capitalist society, Piven and Cloward suggest we consider the systemic consequences of the new welfare reform policies and the cumulative effects in the labor market. As more and more poor and unskilled women enter the low-wage labor
market under welfare reform, they will end up competing with poor job seekers who
are already there. Yet, this body of research is frequently overlooked by policy
makers in favor of theorists who stigmatize and blame poor women on welfare for
failing to conform to notions of self-sufficiency and work, bad moral choices, and
individual behavior.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of
1996 represents an attack on women heads of non-traditional families. Rather than
encouraging a women’s efforts to support their families in any way possible, they are
marginalized and condemned for failing to conform to the ideal of the white middle
message reflected in the welfare reform legislation is that poor women can best
improve their economic standing by marrying a wage-earning man. In this way,
welfare reform promotes both the traditional work ethic and the traditional nuclear
family (Quadagno, 1994).

In sum, scholars and social scientists have played an important role in what
could be viewed as a war against welfare parents. While many scholars have disputed
terms like under-class, welfare dependency, and “culture of poverty,” the proponents
of these views have prevailed as those most influential in shaping the current welfare
reform policy. The views of Lewis, Mead, Moynihan, and Murray legitimize images
of welfare dependency, out of wedlock childbearing, the breakdown of the normative
family structure among the poor, the new paternalism, government intervention in
poor women’s lives, and the “culture of poverty.” Their writings both influence and
perpetuate stereotypes contained in welfare reform policy, that women must be forced into the paid labor market and in doing so will pull themselves out of poverty.

The literature illustrates that policy-makers have drawn upon writings of social scientist who focus on what is wrong with welfare programs and welfare recipients rather than what is wrong with the economy (Lewis, 1968, Mead, 1986, 1997, Moynihan, 1965, Murray, 1994). The preoccupation with welfare incentives and disincentives continues to focus on welfare’s behavioral effects on recipients. An alternative perspective would be to emphasize how best to meet people’s basic needs in society as the major purpose of social policy (Schram, 1995). By ignoring the economic causes of poverty and focusing instead on how to change the behavior of poor women, we send the message that poverty will continue to be tolerated, but welfare will not.

As we now approach re-authorization of welfare reform legislation, scholars, policy makers and the public continue to debate the source of poverty and of welfare dependency. Yet, missing from the debate over welfare is an understanding of the experiences of poverty and welfare from the point of view of people who are now living through welfare reform. Rarely have the voices of poor parents been heard in the debate over their own fate. The purpose of my study is to give voice to their experiences, perceptions, opportunities, and concerns as they live through this important shift in policy toward poor parents and families on welfare.
THEORETICAL APPROACH

Standpoint refers to the perspectives and understandings shared by members of a group based on their “social location” or relationship to those with more or less power and resources in society. According to Patricia Hill-Collins (1997) knowledge is central to “maintaining and changing unjust systems of power.” In the case of marginalized groups, these shared perspectives based in social location give particular insight into the workings of the social order and a deeper understanding of power and domination (including social policy and programs) from the point of view of those experiencing it. For example, women perceived as “dependent” on welfare have historically been marginalized as a group; and although individual experiences will be unique, the kinds of opportunities and obstacles they encounter on a daily basis will parallel those situations that challenge welfare recipients as a group. By examining the experiences of parents on welfare, a group knowledge can be created and used to empower recipients, inform social policy, and to create social change.

Also a standpoint theorist, Dorothy Smith argues that women’s experiences and values are “conspicuously” absent from the dominant cultural discourses. Sociology, like other forms of discourse in society, largely reflects men’s values and experiences while ignoring women’s roles and experiences. A “male-centered” sociology has been created that both reflects and perpetuates dominant values and “relations of ruling” (Smith, 1997). Smith posits that feminist standpoint theory, as a method of sociological inquiry, situates inquiry in the everyday experiences of peoples’ lives. Research that takes women’s standpoint begins in experience and
provides access to knowledge that is often viewed by social scientists, policy makers, and the public at large as “uninteresting, unimportant, and routine” (Smith, 1997). While social relations are reflected and realized in and through individual experiences, it is social location that holds the key to greater understanding. Listening to the voices of those on the “bottom” is important because these are the voices and experiences that are obscured by the dominant discourse.

Standpoint theory helps to illustrate the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in the everyday lives of welfare recipients by looking at their experiences holistically. Often research that focuses only on race, class, or gender alone misses how interconnected these forms of oppression are within social structure. By seeking to understand welfare reform from welfare recipients’ points of view, this research attempts to shatter many stereotypes about welfare recipients that are based on one-dimensional (mis) understandings of the impact of race, class, and gender on the lives of poor parents on welfare.

In sum, standpoint theory is an appropriate theoretical perspective for understanding the lives of welfare parents because it emphasizes how the “relations of ruling” organize the lives of women living welfare reform. In other words, understanding social policy from the points of view of those experiencing it is important because people living through welfare reform have particular insights based on social location, poverty, and marginalization while experiencing the consequences of social policy and social programs. Presenting research in this way serves to
uncover hidden constraints within welfare reform legislation and, in so doing, politicizes and exposes the everyday struggles in welfare recipients’ lives.

METHODS

In conducting this research, I drew upon both feminist and qualitative research traditions to collaborate with SPIN parents in a research project that seeks to understand what it is like to experience welfare reform. This project brings to bear the unique experiences of the men and women who participate in SPIN activities. As a sociological practitioner, I am interested in understanding both the impact and consequences of welfare reform for poor parents. I am also interested in the processes entailed in collaboration between researchers and members of the community. Therefore, my project is two pronged: 1) to gather and analyze data that will contribute to an understanding of what it is like to experience welfare reform; and 2) to gather data and analyze the processes entailed in engaging in participatory action research.

Qualitative methods immerse the researcher in the setting under study and seek to discover participants’ perspectives on their worlds. In contrast to quantitative methods that provide information about outcomes and broad trends that are generalizable to larger populations, qualitative methods provide an understanding of perspectives, experiences, meanings, and processes that shape behavior but are often obscured by numbers alone. This methodological approach to studying welfare
reform is important because of those currently debating welfare reform are far removed from the people who are living on welfare or who have left the system.

Feminist research methods comprise another important component of my methodological approach. Feminist methods strive to place the voices of women in the center of the research. By listening to those who have been traditionally “ignored, censored, and suppressed,” feminist methods work to create a situated knowledge from an insider’s point of view (DeVault, 1996; Smith, 1997). Hartman, a feminist social worker and researcher, believes progressive researchers have an obligation to facilitate the telling of life stories of oppressed and silenced people (in Butler and Nevin, 1997).

Feminist methodologists (DeVault, 1996, Diamond, 1992, Smith, 1987, Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995) recognize that understanding the worlds of others depends upon the character and quality of the relationships between the researcher and the researched. Feminist research methods recognize the importance of a self-reflective approach that promotes immersion and closeness rather than distance and objectivity. Throughout my project, I attempted to develop a safe and trusting relationship with the members of SPIN in an effort to obtain rich and meaningful data. I was invited by the director of SPIN and by SPIN parents to share their experiences by listening to their stories about how they negotiate welfare reform, as well as by participating in SPIN organizing activities. I utilized participant observation and unstructured, in-depth interviews that allowed the participants to speak for themselves. In addition, I engaged in participant observation at SPIN
meetings, advocacy training sessions, social service agencies, and during local lobbying efforts. Because the SPIN members have welcomed my participation, taking field-notes was visible to all members.

Feminist methodologists reject the notion of "value-neutral" social science achieved by establishing distance between the researcher and the researched. Rather, scholars from these traditions acknowledge and encourage immersion in the lives of those whose social worlds we hope to understand, combined with self-reflection on the impact and significance of our own participation. In order to highlight the artful and creative ways welfare parents negotiate their everyday lives, I committed myself to participating fully in SPIN activities, to hearing and honoring what others had to say, and to reflecting on my own assumptions, values, and perspectives.

For this research, I conducted 10 qualitative interviews that focused on the impact of welfare reform on SPIN members lives. I participated in numerous SPIN activities and developed trust and acceptance in the group. In addition, the director of SPIN spoke on my behalf during numerous meetings, further allowing me to be trusted and accepted. My first interview was with an active member of SPIN who subsequently became the president of the board of directors. I had previously heard parts of her story during SPIN gatherings and knew that she had numerous rich experiences. This woman often organized SPIN meetings in her own home and was extremely active in the organization. She became invaluable in the recruitment of further interviews. She is a trusted and committed member of SPIN and after our interview she made announcements during meetings encouraging other participants to
agree to be interviewed. During such meetings, I obtained a list of fifteen participants who agreed to be interviewed. Nine of the interviews conducted came from this list. The final interview was arranged by the program director after she had met an older African American woman at a shelter. This participant had recently become homeless as a result of welfare sanctions. Finally, interviews were transcribed verbatim. Field-notes from the participant observation aspect of this project were coded and analyzed, yet the data collected from interviews remains at the heart of this project. Interviews were carefully coded and analyzed with confidentiality of participants protected at all times.

I attempted to include a diverse group of participants. I deliberately tried to balance the ten interviews to include a diversity of race, ethnicity, and entry into welfare. The final sample consisted of nine women and one man. Five self-identified as Latino or biracial (Mexican and white), two as African American, and three as white. Two of the women are grandparents raising grandchildren. Of each of the ten interviewees, one parent is no longer receiving cash aid, two parents are only receiving cash-aid for the children, and the remaining seven parents are receiving cash-aid for themselves and their children. Three of the parents attend school and work part time, three only attend school, and one works as an “on-call” employee at a temporary employment agency. Two of the parents were in the process of applying for disability aid and one parent was planning to begin classes to be a certified nursing assistant. Three of the participants are divorced and are raising their children as
single parents. Five are either single parents or grandparents and two are currently married with mixed families.

In all but two of the interviews, I met with the participants in their homes, creating a comfortable and private setting for both the interviewee and myself. In each of these interviews children were present, and at times, needed tending to. Some children were curious about what was going on, but this was in no way a hindrance to the process. One participant met me at the SPIN office for an interview which offered less privacy than the home interviews. The last participant was unable to bring company into the apartment where she was staying since it was only temporary, thus we met at a diner in her neighborhood. This setting of the last interview proved to be quite private and intimate.

Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was audio-taped with the participants’ permission. Interviews were loosely structured with a conversational style. This interview method allows participants to share their stories in their own way, with their own words and at their own pace. Interviews began with “chit-chat” about our families, neighborhoods, past experiences with school or relationships, and often with questions about my research. In an effort to ensure the comfort of interviewees, I asked that they begin their stories about welfare reform when they were ready. During each interview, I asked parents to share what they would like to tell the authors of welfare reform legislation in an effort to voice their ideas and to share dialogue about how they can become agents of social change. Their stories are captivating and fascinating, and I was able to obtain rich, meaningful data while being
treated as a close personal friend. Throughout the interviews, participants shared intimate and often painful details of their lives. My respect for the women and the man I interviewed is tremendous, and I did not hold back my admiration for all that they have accomplished in their lives. At all times during interviews, it was important to me to place the experiences of the parents at the center of the conversation and honor their stories.

Another important component of feminist methodologies is their inherent link to action and social change. The members of SPIN seek both understanding and change. My involvement was based in the tradition of feminist Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR combines three activities: research, education, and action (Hall, 1981). This means that the researcher must incorporate core components of PAR which include: active and democratic community participation, non-traditional power relations, praxis, a focus on empowerment, and science as a tool for change, into the fabric of the project. PAR strategies involve democratic participation by community members in the research process beginning with the definition of the problem, through to production of the results. But, participation by community members is more than just involvement; participation entails control of the research by those being studied (Cancian and Armstead, 1993; Sarri and Sarri 1991).

To acquire active involvement, the researcher must attempt to eliminate the hierarchical relationship between herself and the community. To accomplish this, I planned to invite a group of interested SPIN members to dialogue, organize, and further formulate the research questions. I anticipated the educational and
consciousness-raising aspect of PAR to develop. As SPIN members worked together, I envisioned further refinement of research questions, a method of inquiry, and activities that would lead to social change. I planned to follow-up on the interests expressed by SPIN members and work with them as they requested my involvement in their research. My hope was that if the project progressed far enough, SPIN members would also involve themselves as researchers, and that I would train them in the art and the methods of social science as tools for change and support for their lives.

However, as I got into the project, I realized that I would not be able to carry out a project based on PAR principles. SPIN parents are overburdened with endless welfare-to-work activities as well as obligations to their families and home. I realized at once that the parents would not have the time to participate and collaborate based on traditional PAR principles. Yet, I feel strongly that the parents were full collaborators in this research. Puzzling over this gap between how the bulk of PAR literature describes community involvement and my own experience, which fell short of this model, I questioned the traditional PAR model and began to think about a new way to think about collaboration.

As usually envisioned, PAR researchers attempt to involve community members in various phases of the research process from the inception of the research question to construction of the data gathering instruments, data analysis, and writing. Yet, conceived in this way, the meaning of collaboration is based on models of research or “knowledge production” drawn from the academy, not the community.
That is, PAR completely assumes that collaboration is occurring if community members can be seen to engage in activities usually associated with what goes on in an academic setting or in a research organization.

As noted above, SPIN members participated in few of these activities. Yet, over the course of the interviews, parents accounts of their experiences shaped the course of the interviews. The final story of welfare reform that appears in this thesis is based on their accounts. That is, I posed initial questions based on information they provided about their interests on the issues, they provided accounts of their experiences, and I drew upon their responses in formulating the next question, and so on. In this sense, I truly feel that from the inception of the research question, to construction of questions, to the shaping of the final story of welfare reform, there was a collaborative effort between myself and SPIN members. This realization has led me to rethink and broaden my understanding of the meaning of participatory action research.

My methods remained open and flexible, with a commitment to “sharing power” with the SPIN parents, and my position was interactive and democratic. Consequently, the research design was not solely my own, but rather a combined effort of researcher and researched. Patti Lather (1988:570) suggests that this form of feminist empirical inquiry operates out of a “critical praxis-oriented paradigm concerned with both producing emancipatory knowledge and empowering the researched.”
PROJECT SIGNIFICANCE

Welfare reform has been declared a “success” based on the removal of poor people from the welfare rolls. But, we know little about the impact of this policy change on people’s everyday lives. Current research on welfare reform based primarily on quantitative data provides information about broad trends but is far removed from the actual everyday experiences of women who are poor and living through welfare reform. My goal in conducting this study is to contribute to the body of knowledge on welfare reform by presenting a portrait of poor parents as they live through “the end of welfare as we know it.”

By listening to the voices of women describing what it was like to live on welfare, what lead them to be on welfare and how they live through welfare reform, we can gain valuable insider’s knowledge that may serve to contest the nearly uniform reports about the “success” of welfare reform. This project stands to offer valuable insight and a unique understanding of the artful and creative ways women and parents negotiate their social world, and offers an opportunity for them to tell their story in their own words. My hope is that the voices of the SPIN members will contribute to changing the focus from “ending welfare as we know it” to permanently ending poverty. For those who achieve self-sufficiency while participating in the program, my research will provide an understanding of the circumstances and conditions that lead to successful outcomes. By engaging in a tradition of participatory action research with the members of SPIN, we stand to produce a shared knowledge of these
experiences and processes than can empower, demystify, and ultimately challenge the way welfare and welfare reform is approached.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this research is to discover the impact of welfare reform from the perspectives of the parents living through it. I wanted to find out if welfare reform was leading parents toward self-sufficiency and what the process was like from the point of view of the parents as they lived it on a day-to-day basis. What I found was that parents on Temporary Assistance For Needy Families (TANF) are graceful and resilient as they negotiate a bureaucratic system filled with obstacles and hardships at every turn. I discovered that parents living through the new welfare policies were able to negotiate time limits and work-first job requirements, inflexible rules that do not take into account their families needs and circumstances, and punitive practices that often hurt more than help. And I learned that through all of these hardships, parents were able to take what they could from their experiences so as to improve their situations, while discarding the rest.

The poor parents on welfare with whom I talked are committed to their families and children and are motivated to be successful at whatever cost. They must submit to a variety of demeaning practices. Most suffered humiliating treatment from eligibility workers as well as case managers and faced numerous other barriers that are put in place to control their behavior. All wanted to work and achieve a better life for themselves and their children but were placed in precarious positions, often
through no fault of their own, while striving to achieve the American Dream. Welfare parents were acutely aware of the “welfare lens” used by many in the community to view and judge their lives, and aware that their rights are taken away based on assumptions about the abilities of the poor and people of color to make appropriate choices.

This research suggests that poor parents are often left feeling powerless about their futures because they have to negotiate a system that questions their work ethic and their ability to parent while offering limited choices and contradictory information about the new Welfare-to-Work regulations. Yet, this position of powerlessness is not adopted by all the parents. Instead many of the parents are empowered, through the social support they receive from each other and from organizations such as SPIN, to resist the oppressive practices and consequences of welfare reform. As parents told me their welfare reform stories, there was ample evidence of both individual and collective resistance, that, in essence, is leading them closer to self-sufficiency than all the new welfare reform policies.

Parents come to welfare with unique wants, expectations, and needs. In what follows, I discuss what these expectations are, what welfare parents actually got from welfare reform, and how it impacts their everyday lives. Next, I review contradictory responses to these consequences that include both positive and negative outcomes. Finally, I suggest recommendations for ways to truly help welfare parents achieve self-sufficiency.
What Parents Wanted From Welfare Reform

Parents who apply for TANF (cash aid) are often at the end of their ropes and living through a desperate time in their lives while looking for a way to support their children. Applying for welfare is a response to an inability to provide for their families in any other way and is usually a last resort. The parents I interviewed arrived at the welfare line for a variety of reasons. Several of the divorced women were fleeing domestic violence. Two of the parents were abandoned by the fathers of their children and are now bringing up their children as single parents. Two interviewees are grandmothers who have adopted their grandchildren. One of the parent’s husband was incarcerated, and one parent had been laid off and was unable to make ends meet. All of the parents were seeking temporary help and support and were willing to do “what ever it takes” to become self-sufficient. As parents became familiar with the Welfare-to-Work program, they wanted to participate in training programs, receive help with getting a job, or, better yet, meaningful employment that would help them on the road to self-sufficiency.

Parents arrive at the welfare office after all other options have been used up, often thinking that “the government will help me” because that’s what it is there for. Parents want to make a better life for themselves and their children and they come to TANF for support and help. Some of the parents had a preconceived notion of what welfare was and how it works, whether they had been exposed to it before or not. While several of the parents were worried about the new changes that welfare reform
would bring, they were still optimistic that it would help to lift them out of their current situation. Trisha, a 27 year-old white single mother with one child was attending nursing school and working part time had this to say.

So when welfare reform was coming around and stuff, you know, there was a lot of things that, that scared me about it and stuff, but I don’t know, I’m still one of those optimistic believers, going, well, you know, if they are going to change it, they had to have research it, and, um, ok, there’s going to be kinks, but, you know, over all it will be better.

Trisha had positive expectations about welfare reform even though she doesn’t know very much about it. She had placed her faith in the government and believes if policy makers think welfare reform will help people, it probably will. Trisha believed, as many citizens living in the United States believe, that changes in public policy and social programs are well researched and intended to provide recipients with the best possible solutions. Trisha, like others, assumed that the welfare workers are suitably trained to deal with the problems and issues that had brought applicants to the welfare office in the first place. The parents I interviewed embraced these same ideals about social support programs.

Pam, a 43-year-old divorced white woman with three children, had never worked outside the home and never thought about working because she believed her husband would take care of the family, just as her father had done. She was hopeful the “professionals” would help her find a job.

...I don’t know what kind of help I wanted them to give me, but I thought they were professional and knew how to handle someone like me. Because they been...Maximus [private Welfare-to Work-provider] is a 15 year old company, and they have so much experience helping people get jobs...
In a somewhat self-mocking tone, Pam had expressed expectations that the professionals in this experienced, "15 year-old company" would help her find a job. Pam believed that such a company would enable her to leave welfare and find a job to help support her children.

She was aware that she had some special needs that must be addressed before she could choose the right direction and was under the impression that the new welfare policies were put in place to help people such as herself find jobs.

... well sure it seems hopeful, of course, I mean their...it's just...[long pause] I think I'm one of those....special cases or whatever [nervous laugh]. Well, not special, but you know, one of those that needs an extra hand and extra help. A little bit more. [said in the workers voice] "Well Pam let's see what you like," or ...you know, how they give you those little tests, to see what I like, maybe to spark me into doing something.

Similarly, Karina, a 35 year-old Latina with one child had been in a marriage for 18 years when her husband walked out and never returned, leaving her with no means of support. She had been completely controlled by this man who forbade her to work or go to school and gave her an allowance. Here Karina explains her impression of welfare.

I thought, oh, I gotta go to this place because they are gonna help me get a job (laughs). You know, so I said, "Yeah, I need to get a job. I need to be able to take care of me and my son," and I'm always thinking...but the government is there to help me, so I felt very fortunate that the government would do this.

Karina had a positive attitude about the government program and felt fortunate that such a program existed that would help her take care of her son in her time of need. She assumed the program would assist her in getting a job and approached it not as a handout, but as an opportunity.
Anna also looked forward to orientation and had a specific expectation, of an opportunity to better prepare herself for the job market by getting a GED. She was focused on what she needed to get ahead. Based on her experiences looking for a job, she sought a job that would pay her a living wage. She realized she has some educational limitations and was motivated to improve herself. She even had a plan and considered welfare not as a handout but as a means to reaching her goals.

Yes, So when I went for my orientation, she told me you know, that I was there because it was time for me to go to “job search,” or if I had plans of what I wanted to do. I told her, “I don’t want to go right now to job search, to work, because I want to get myself prepared. If I’m gonna be self-sufficient, I want to go for a “training,” and I want to ….the first thing I want to do is get my GED [said with great conviction]. Because I’ve been looking for work, and everywhere you go, they ask you for a high school diploma or GED. So that’s the first thing I want to do.”

Anna, unlike Trisha, Pam, and Karina, had a more specific expectation about what welfare reform would provide; an opportunity to get the proper education and job training needed to earn a living wage. She recognized her own needs and had a plan to ask for training for a GED.

These examples illustrate that even before any services are rendered to parents, their needs and expectations are quite varied.

**What They Got From Welfare Reform**

Beyond their specific needs parents all share the assumption that Welfare-to-Work programs will provide opportunities to improve their economic well-being by providing assessments, education, and job training that lead to obtaining a living wage. However, what they actually got from welfare reform was quite different.
Monitoring parents compliance with rules by verifying each and every activity only seemed to hinder parents and use up the little time they had to participate in the daily activities of family life as they tried to move toward self-sufficiency. Moreover, what they continually found as they tried to negotiate the new welfare system was not help and support in the form of job training, but rather work “activities,” threats of sanctions, demeaning and humiliating treatment and bureaucratic practices.

Welfare reform focuses on “work-first” as the primary goal of CalWORKs. A single parent is mandated to be either working 32 hours a week (married couple 35 hours) or taking part in welfare-to-work activities (assessments, job club, job search) in order to receive cash aid (San Diego County, HHSA 27-07, 3/00). They may continue to receive aid continuously for 18-24 months or five years over their lifetime. As long as all requirements are met support services such as transportation, child care, and other expenses, such as a small clothing allowance, are available while enrolled in Welfare-to-Work activities. Parents must also keep all of their children’s immunizations up to date, make sure their children go to school every day, and keep all appointments made by their employment case manager.

CalWORKs assignments that satisfy the 32-hour per week work requirement may include: Work Experience (unpaid work that will improve or provide basis job skills), On-the- Job Training (government or service provider agency wage subsidy paid to an employer), Work Study (paid work as part of a vocational education program), Adult Basic Education (reading, writing, math, and English as a second
language) Secondary Education or GED (high school diploma or certificate instruction), Job Skills Training, Vocational Training, or Education directly related to Employment (vocation specific education and training for employed participants), Job Search and Job Readiness Assistance (Job Club), and Special Services (mental health, substance abuse, and family violence services if these are deemed necessary to obtain employment). Parents must be involved in Welfare-to-Work activities until they get a job or until their time limit on the receipt of cash aid runs out. Parents must agree to abide by all Welfare-to-Work rules as a mandatory participant, and sign a Welfare-to-Work contract to continue to receive cash aid. Any deviation from the Welfare-to-Work plan signed by the parents is cause for sanctions. These policies and programs were what the parents with whom I spoke turned to. The promise of welfare reform is that participation in these activities while following program requirements will end their dependency on welfare and lead to better lives for themselves and their children. However, what the program promised and what parents actually got were frequently at odds. In what follows, I discuss the experiences of SPIN members, particularly how the program helps and hinders them as they pursue goals of self-sufficiency.
Work-First and Negative Views About Education

Welfare reform has adopted a work-first approach. This means that getting a job, no matter how much it pays, is welfare reform’s primary goal. Since parents often have little formal education and often-irregular work histories in the formal labor market, work-first often means taking low-paying, temporary, or entry level, often dead-end jobs. Aware that these jobs will not enable them to get off of welfare and out of poverty, parents want assessment, job training, and education that would enable them to get jobs that paid a living wage. While education is permitted under welfare reform, only short-term educational programs leading to jobs that will result in immediate employment are generally approved as part of a parent’s Welfare-to-Work plan.

In this example, Pam was aware of her limited work experience and assumed the employability worker would be helping her to find an appropriate direction. However, her experience with the assessment test proved to be futile.

I mean it was ... nothing... nothing... nothing [motioning as if checking off a list]. I have a really bad attitude toward Maxamus because I kept trying to tell them that I don’t know what I want to do, and I don’t have any experience, and alls it was was, “Look for a job, look for a job,”... I, don’t... [frustrated and sighing] I’m telling you, I don’t know what I want to do.

Throughout the interview, Pam seemed to internalize her shortcomings and blamed herself for not knowing how to ask for help. This internalized failure was compounded by the attitude workers had toward recipients. The hard to serve are
shifted around. Rather than working with them to discover the skills they possess they are passed over with the reform refrain, “Get a job, any job, get a better job.”

The focus on work-first rather than education proved particularly disconcerting for poor parents. Welfare recipients who were trying to advance their skills through a formal education were told repeatedly to quit school and get a job.

Mayra, a Latina and former single mother with three children, vividly remembered being called in to the welfare office to sign her welfare to work contract.

M: I was waiting for them to call me in, which was when I was around six months pregnant. They finally called me in... I was shocked that they told me, that I had to... get out of school. I was halfway in the semester, and they said, “Quit school.”

S: How long had you been in school?

M: Oh, I was six or seven months away from obtaining my associate’s degree...[They said,] “Quit school and get a job.” And I said, “But what type of job, I don’t have any work history, and I’m pregnant.” And they said, um, that just because I was pregnant didn’t mean that I couldn’t get a job, and that they had a lot, they had listings of jobs that I could go and work at. And that, um, since I didn’t have any work history, and all I had was gonna be an associate degree, that um, that maybe I could clean something.

Mayra has approximately one semester to go to receive an associate’s degree and also to reach a goal that she had been working towards for nearly 4 years. She wanted to transfer to a four year college where she could pursue her dream of becoming a social worker. However, with the new welfare reform’s work first requirements, the message given to Mayra was that a job “cleaning” was better for her future than an education that would lead to a job that paid a living age.

Anna told the story of what happened to another parent when her time was up.

S: You mean the welfare-to-work clock time was up and that was it?
A: Yes, [the worker] called them into the office and said, "You can’t go to school no more, your clock has stopped, you time is up and you gotta go to job search." That’s it, not even giving them a chance of doing their test so they can get there GED. It’s just terrible, TERRIBLE, the way they want to manipulate you, threaten you with taking ... stopping ... or sanctioning you, and you better hurry because the clock is going to stop. They told her that she would not be able to finish her school, and they told her that they... were talking to her, she said, as if they were controlling her life and that she had exhausted her time.

Useless Training

Parents often feel pressured to sign up for training programs sponsored by the county. Since the county must fulfill quotas regarding the number of recipients they move off of welfare and these training programs are credited the same as a job, parents who have difficulty finding immediate employment are enrolled in these programs. It seemed to several parents that meeting quotas, was more important than providing effective training to the parents.

...so they want me to go in and sign do this nine week training certificate that would, um, that would start in October, that’s why they were rushing... that’s why they wanted me quick right where to and then... They wanted me to sign, sign right now, she kept telling me, and sign right now.

Several parents were under the impression the workers were getting bonuses to get them out the door and working. As it turned out, their insight was correct. According to CalWORKs regulations (Program Guide, letter number 87), bonuses for signing parents up for these programs is part of the CalWORKs salary enhancement program. Pay-points are issued to caseworkers for every person in a job for 30 days, 60 days, 90 days etc. In the past, pay-points were not given if the recipient was engaged in school activities, domestic violence counseling, or mental health or drug
treatment. However, these regulations have been revised so that now, all Welfare-to-Work activities are rewarded with pay-points.

While the Federal government has installed a huge incentive program to reduce the welfare rolls, the objective does not appear to be self-sufficiency for parents, but rather placement in approved Welfare-to-Work activities which primarily include low-paying entry level jobs. Policies such as this promote work requirements over useful training. Mayra had this to say about work requirements as she spoke to a group of SPIN members.

I heard at one of the [SPIN] meetings that these people were getting paid for every time they got somebody out of the training to go to work, that was like bonuses they would give them, to get them out there working. Over there we’re running around, rushing you to learn fast to get you out the door and get that money.

These job training activities would not necessarily be a negative aspect of the program except that parents reported they got little from them. After attending mandatory training programs provided by the county or private contractors such as Lockheed Martin, Catholic Charities, and Maximus, some parents still had not learned the skills needed to get decent paying jobs. Anna stated that what she learned in a computer class she taught herself.

There was a whole mess of people just sitting in the classroom, and the teacher would be just sitting at his computer. If I didn’t know any better, I wouldn’t have known what button to push on the computer to turn it on and off. I didn’t know what Word was, I didn’t know what WordPerfect was.
Training is supposed to provide parents with useful skills that will lead them out of welfare, but Monica comments on how it seemed to be just an activity to kill time. I asked her what kind of training it was.

The way you picture, the way they said it was going to be, is not how it was. I was told I was going to go to a training room, show me computer classes. I just sat in front of a computer for eight hours.

Parents are hopeful that they are gaining new skills to become gainfully employed. They participated in “office skills” training, but once they finished the classes, they were still unable to pass the mandatory testing required to get jobs.

The training they give over here is not up to standards, they are behind a lot. A lot of the girls that got office skills went out to look for jobs, and they didn’t qualify. They had the interviews, and they passed the physical interview [on site personal interview], but when it came to testing, they did not pass, and they ended up getting cashier jobs.

Disappointments are an everyday occurrence for parents on welfare. Parents are well aware of what it costs to support a family and are seeking training and positions that pay a living wage so that they can become self sufficient. The disappointment rings through the voice of this parent when she states that other parents ended up getting jobs as cashiers. Over and over again, parents are built up only to be let down. This parent’s experiences mirror those of the previous woman and show the emotional toll the inadequate training had on the recipients.

The training wasn’t up to their standards, not up to date. They didn’t pass the test. And a lot of them, they looked so sad coming back, thinking we were gonna do good. We had this training, and we learned all this, but it wasn’t what they were asking for. And it was just so sad.
Rigid and Inflexible Rules

Parents also found that welfare policies are made up of inflexible rules that don’t take into account life circumstances or the needs of poor parents. Bernice is 50 years old and, after losing her cash aid, spent several months living on the street. She has lived a harsh life and overcome many obstacles. Her health has debilitated, and she has developed several physical disabilities. She has also been trying to obtain social security insurance. In the meantime, she is required to complete rigid work-first requirements within specific time limits, even though her doctor has stated that she is unable to work.

Well they wanted me to go to work, but my knees were hurting so bad, so what they did ... they give me doctor forms for my doctor to fill out. At the time the doctor was telling me that I was unable to work at that time, and he still said I’m unable to work, unable to stand, to walk certain distance, but the welfare workers still think I’m supposed to get out and go look for some type of work.... I tell them, “Well I’m having problems with my knees,” all right. So, that’s when they were telling me, “Well your time is ticking.” I said, “What is that? You have to explain it to me, what is that, your time is ticking”.... They said, “Well, you’ve been on [cash aid] a certain length of time, and you’re on the clock, and your time is ticking, and it might run out.”

Clearly, Bernice has followed up on what was asked of her. She has produced a doctor’s letter, but her worker continues to torment her. Although states can exempt up to 20% of the caseload from time limits, this option was rarely suggested for recipients such as Bernice who was obviously experiencing medical hardships. Instead, the state substitutes punitive work-fare activities for meaningful education, training, or income support. Rather than working with her to utilize current skills and resource, or giving her access to learn new skills, the worker just reminds her the “clock is ticking.”
Welfare reform procedures are implemented with an almost boot camp mentality with the underlying assumption is that welfare recipients must be coerced into action. Agreeing to follow through on a procedural regulation is not enough. Parents must constantly verify how they spend their time, prove their children are attending school, and that they are working or attending school themselves by getting signatures from the appropriate agencies. These demeaning surveillance tactics take a toll, not only on the parents’ time, but on their sense of dignity. Mindy, a 35 year-old white woman with three children who fled a domestic violence situation had this to say about both the unreasonable requests for documentation and the treatment she received when she questioned them.

I do everything that is asked of me... and because I moved, they were totally investigating me for I don’t know what, bank statements, twelve months, I needed a whole twelve months, and then when I called to question about it, my worker was supposedly unable to be found, and her supervisor told me she got frustrated with me on the phone and said, “Well, then you know what, I will just close your case.”

Several parents who went through Job Club commented on the hardships the dress-code requirements caused them. Rather than creating guidelines for appropriate work attire that women could adapt with the wardrobe they already own, they were required to adopt the “Job Club” uniform. This means that women had to be dressed in a black skirt, a white blouse, neutral stockings, and pumps. Each participant was given a $25 allowance to purchase what they needed. There was no flexibility with the dress-code requirements.

Here is another example of the rigid rules imposed on poor parents. Karina expresses her amazement over the forced dress-code and also points out the
marginalized position the recipients are placed in by controlling the most minute details of their lives. The dress code comprises another example of how assumptions about the abilities of welfare recipients have been translated directly into the new welfare reform procedures.

You had to be there in a skirt. A skirt and pumps, pantyhose, and a blouse or a top. They didn’t even wear skirts. They wear pants, and we were all supposed to wear skirts, and a lot of the girls in there didn’t have money to go buy a skirt or to buy pumps. So they give us an allowance of twenty-five dollars to go get pumps and a skirt and whatever we needed. Even if we had to wash the outfit everyday and wear it everyday. It didn’t matter to them. Women had slacks, but they weren’t allowed to wear them. They were forced to turn around and go wherever they could to borrow, to go to Salvation Army, or to go wherever to find a skirt.

Parents found Job Club activities less than motivating and just another practice that imposed on their time and daily activities without assisting them in their search for independence.

Mandatory classes were also frequently seen as just a way to waste their time by fulfilling Welfare-to-Work requirements. As part of the job search component of the program, parents were obligated to spend eight hours a day in training sessions, yet they found nothing of value in them. Parents stated the content of the training material did not require eight hours of class time and were insulted by the lack of planning that went into it. The fact that the content of these classes was not supervised indicates what little value the parents represented. Mindy explained her impression of Job Club training.

...then they would go into all this nonsense, reviewing papers that you could have just taken home and read. And we spent eight hours... papers about how to dress, how to talk, how to present yourself... We’d be talking about things that really weren’t that helpful at all but they were just buying time because we had to be there eight hours. It was just a waste of time.
Joslyn, a 55 year-old African American women and divorced mother of seven grown children, was currently bring up her three grandsons after her daughter’s tragic death. She had an Associate of Arts degree, had been in the workforce for 30 years, and was currently retraining after an injury at work. Although she was already enrolled in college classes, she was mandated to take a CASSAS Test which is an aptitude test to see if she was competent to read and write.

J: I had already signed my Welfare-to-Work plan, I was working on it, and I had no problems with it, but then I noticed that I was always running to do things. It always took me away from my classes. They had me do a CASSAS Test, I had already been in college since 1996, I was already in college.

S: You were in college before you signed your plan?

J: I was already in college, and they had me take the CASSAS test?

S: What is that?

J: It’s a test to see if you can read and write. I told them, “Yes, I’m already in college.” Then I talked to [Cal WORKs worker] who takes care of us at the college, and she said, “Well, it’s a requirement, just go and do it.”

Rather than wave this test for someone who is obviously able to read and write, the rigid rules must be followed at any cost. The consequences of these rigid rules and inflexible practices are that parents’ time is wasted, few find jobs, and are left feeling demoralized and humiliated by workers. Most importantly, after satisfying all these requirements, they are still no closer to their goal of self-sufficiency.
Monitoring and Surveillance

Parents have to verify every activity related to their Welfare-to-Work contract and provide documentation to workers in a timely fashion. This constant verification of every move they made caused hardships in a number of ways for parents. Often parents needed to speak to their workers to verify what the workers wanted from them, and this presented problems as well. Karina related her frustration in this example of trying to reach her worker.

When you do call your case worker or something, you get an answering machine, and your call is not handled in the proper way because you say you called, but then they say they don’t have it, so there’s no way to document what you did in good faith in corresponding to what they require you to do.

Trisha stated the hardship of having to document when her child was both in school and absent from school: “Oh, my biggest thing was the school, the way I had to report the days that my kid was in school and the absences.” Mindy also questioned the rigid rules and why the procedures of verification needed to be done repeatedly, given everything else required of the parents.

They don’t make it, it’s not even making it easy, but to me, it’s like I should fill out the paper once, and that’s fine, and if you want to know what I’m doing, fine, just ask me, you know, but one person can come and ask me (nervous laugh), make copies of it if you need it, whatever, but you know, don’t make me, be doing it.

Parents on welfare are not unlike other parents who struggle against time constraints to get everything done for their families. However, unlike a parent who is not on welfare, they must jump through a variety of bureaucratic hoops while having
fewer material and human resources than do middle class families. Mindy compares these long lists of tasks and work-activities such as meeting with workers, and turning in paperwork to verify their from children’s school attendance to a full time job.

...And so at one point, I was having to take papers to all three of those people, having papers from school signed, and taking them there, and having papers from work signed, taking them to all three of those offices, and then those three offices, and you know that was like a full-time job. You know, it was literally, it was at least eight hours a day that I was spending filling out papers and taking them places, if not more, or waiting for them to come in the mail.

The frustration parents like Mindy feel as they work to meet these controlling requirements suggests that welfare parents have what it takes to hold down responsible jobs, but have a difficult time doing so because they are so busy filling their time with welfare regulations and welfare to work activities.

Trisha expressed how demeaning it was to verify her progress in school repeatedly rather than just checking her grades at the end of the semester. Practices such as keeping tabs on every activity of the parents are directly linked to the assumptions that welfare parents are unable or unwilling to comply to rules and regulations and therefore, must be treated differently like children, who need boundaries set with severe consequences for failing to follow through.

Yeh, it’s like, it’s like being in kindergarten and having to get your mommy, and daddy to sign a note for you. You know, to me, going to school and stuff, my grades at the end of the semester will tell you whether or not I’ve done what I needed to do...

Again, Trisha relates how humiliating these social control practices are as she is forced to get a signature from her instructor to verify that she is actually in class.
The consequence is that she must be humiliated in front of her classmates and her instructor. Practices such as this take an emotional toll on parents.

Um, so they were telling me that I had to take those papers to my instructors, well, my instructors have never seen it before, so now not only do I have to go up to them and have them sign these papers, you know, at the beginning of class they're like. “Well, what's this for?” So I have to stand up in front of my class, telling my teacher, “Well I'm getting welfare, and I need to prove that I am in class, can you please sign it?”

Not only is Trisha humiliated, but she is placed in a submissive position where welfare practices are controlling her life. Although she is able to negotiate a maze of welfare rules and regulations, get her child to daycare in a timely fashion, pass her nursing courses, and get verification of all her actions, she is still perceived as someone who must be controlled for her own good. Fulfilling requirements leads to more work that places demands on parent's already overburdened lives.

Sanctions and Threats of Losing Cash Benefits

Without an understanding of the welfare requirements, and lacking any other forms of support, welfare parents live in fear of losing cash aid and other benefits if they do not adhere to requirements. Not only do parents get threatened for not “signing” but also for not following up on welfare to work regulations, whether they are aware of them or not. Mindy, who had recently escaped from a domestic violence situation with her three children, received this letter in the mail.

... Catholic Charities [private Welfare-to-Work provider] sent me a letter and said, “If you do not come in and fulfill this two-week workshop to find a job, you will be dropped. Sanctions will no longer be available, you will be completely dropped.”
Many parents told of incidents where those who hold the power over recipients not only imply their control but plainly stated it. The threat of sanctions and loss of cash-aid is constantly held over recipients’ heads, while the worker sounds as if she is just doing her job. Tomas’ shares his insights into the pressures recipients experience and illustrates how they are constantly threatened with sanctions and losing their cash benefits. He vividly remembered how the orientation facilitator treated him and the rest of the parents.

She was very rude, the director of this orientation, she was totally rude, she was totally disrespectful, she was totally downgrading, she was um, very um, ...she was full of snide remarks, she talked to them as if she was in control of their lives. She even went to the extent to say that she was! She flat out said, someone asked a question and she said, “Well, we control your lives here, or else you don’t get no money, or we’ll cut you off.”

Tomas continues to explain the social control aspect of getting parents to cooperate with workers by forcing them to sign contracts whether they want to or not.

She [caseworker] said that people had to sign those papers right then and there, or they were going to get cut off. People signed all these papers under complete duress, with the threat of... we’re cutting you off and your whole family. So if you don’t sign here, no money for next month. And, you know, people are not in a position [pause], not in a position financially to afford not having what little money they have, that’s their form of existence. I mean nobody has any money. It was just unreal.

Mindy recalls this encounter with her worker after the worker found out she had been in a domestic violence situation and offers threats instead of support.

...domestic violence came out of my mouth, and the whole “why are you here thing.” [worker] “You need counseling” “I’m in counseling with my children.” [the worker] “You need to go to our [counseling] group, or we’re going to have to sanction you...”
Mindy had already gotten herself and her children into a domestic violence counseling program. However, the worker threatens to impose sanctions if Mindy does not get into a “county program” without considering the hardship it would cause her and her family.

Spanish-speaking parents have particular difficulties. One Spanish speaking recipient who did not read English was asked to sign a contract, a Welfare-to-Work plan, that was in English. Other parents reported that workers tried to pressure recipients to sign forms stating certain training had been completed when it had not. Parents stated workers used deceptive practices to “try to trick you” by telling them that the forms are “not important.” Monica, a 43 year-old Latina with two children whose husband was incarcerated, was acutely aware of several discriminatory practices other Latina’s experienced and the negative outcomes they produced.

A lot of people there can barely speak English, and then they give them papers to sign, and they don’t even know what they are signing. And then they come back later with the ramifications of signing that paper. So then they compound it with a sanction, and then they don’t know how to fill it out, and they end up losing. Because they don’t go to hearing, and it just makes a bad situation worse.

In general, parents were not opposed to following the rules and attending training because most of them were hopeful that by doing so, they would be gaining new skills and moving toward self-sufficiency. But, what parents objected to were the constant threats to their survival and the use of disincentives to control their behavior. Most agreed that a letter stating what was required of them would have been sufficient, rather than resorting to intimidation tactics. The “carrot and stick”
mentality has been a constant in welfare policies, and although the PROWRA is touted as a new approach to welfare reform, the stick continues to control most recipients lives. Something as mundane as changing an appointment is accompanied with the threat of a sanction.

And they don’t tell you that you can make another appointment. They just say if you don’t come in, [it’s] “sanction time.” That’s their favorite word to use, it’s like sanction this and sanction that, and then they will. And you go in there, and you sign because not only do you not [know] what your rights are or what you can do to get some kind of justice...

Most of the parents said they lived in a constant state of fear. They felt anxiety over the possibility that they might unintentionally break a rule. But even when they did everything right, they still had to pay the price when a worker made a mistake or failed to follow through.

...I turned in all my paperwork that my worker asked me for. I called to find out the status, and they told me, “Oh, you’ve been dropped.” And I said, “Well that’s impossible, I just turned in my paperwork two days ago.” “Well we didn’t get it, and your worker’s out on personal leave.”
Demeaning and Humiliating Treatment From Workers

Not only did the program fail to provide the assessments and job training that parents wanted and needed, parents also felt that workers treated them badly, viewing them through the stereotypes of the welfare lens. Karina states very poignantly how the difficulties of her life situation were compounded by trying to get help from welfare. Karina’s comments illustrate how complicated and multi-layered the problems are that bring people to welfare in the first place. After a controlling domestic violence relationship of 18 years, she lost everything that had provided a sense of security in the past.

Yeah, the whole experience with losing everything that I had, losing my home, losing my husband, my integrity, my self worth. You know, and having to deal with the welfare system. I was very depressed, and I would talk to the caseworkers, and they were very like, “Just get your paperwork done, I’m not here to be your psychologist or your therapist. All I need you to do is to have these papers filled out month to month and check with me on how you’re going on your progress and what you’re doing.”

It is not only the level of grief Karina is experiencing but the fact that she is put into a submissive position by her case worker whom she must now report all her actions to.

Parents are unaware that case workers are not trained to offer emotional support. However, because they are unaware of the workers role, the consequence is added stress for the recipient. Parents mistakenly believe workers are also caregivers, however, workers do not engage in care work of any kind. They are there to process
paperwork, make sure the recipient is in compliance, and move them through the program by following welfare policy.

Tomas, who was laid off three years earlier, stayed home and cared for the children while his wife was in school. Originally he was not included on the cash aid case, but when time limits mandated that his wife discontinue her education and begin to work, she opted out and he stepped in. Tomas relates his apprehensions about having to meet with his worker.

I mean, if the objective was to become self-sufficient, then they were not encouraging at all, in the least bit. It was a dread. Once you got a letter or a phone call, it was a dread, and you walked into the office with a lot of stress and trepidation to know that ... I have to deal with this individual again. It was tough. The case workers were just not conducive to getting what you had to get done.

This incident illustrates how insidiously the demeaning treatment from workers affects welfare recipient's psyche while they are viewed through the welfare lens. Tomas questions how such treatment will help lead recipients toward self-sufficiency.

Parents are aware of the welfare lens through which others view their lives and they must find ways to block out these negative experiences. However, the demeaning treatment parents received from case workers had a lasting effect on the self-image of several of the parents I talked to. Anna was a 50 year-old Latina with two grown children who had adopted her granddaughter to prevent her from going into the foster care system. When her granddaughter came to her, she was already receiving cash-aid, but to make ends meet once the adoption came through, she filed a
supplemental cash aid claim. Near the end of our 90 minute interview, she shared this comment.

But I just want to blank out all these bad experiences that I’ve had with welfare and the reform, and if I don’t have to go through that again... I... wouldn’t. You expect that they are going to help you until maybe you can find a way to fix your situation. I have to be seeing the workers that you think are going to be treating you good, respect you, the way you respect them because you see them as someone who is there to give you help, someone to help you and not someone to put you down or yell at you. But they do, and that’s the way they see you.

Anna, like most of the other parents, was painfully aware of the general lack of respect and ridicule she received from workers.

The welfare lens pervades nearly every encounter between parents and workers. Most of the parents made similar comments about remarks that reflected what the workers thought of them for being in the situation they were in. Bernice, stated that she had worked all of her life but was now disabled and homeless for the past nine months due to an unfounded sanction against her. She spoke about how difficult it was trying to sort things out and how hard it was to understand why case workers ridiculed her.

Then on top of that I have workers who tell me I’m stupid, I’m dumb, I’m not getting enough money... I couldn’t get a place, my credit was bad... I couldn’t get anybody to help me... it was weird.

It is hard to think of another situation where an employee is allowed to humiliate a client in this manner. But, parents on welfare are well aware of how the “relations of ruling” (Smith, 1997) organize their lives. Workers hold power over them, and because they are poor and in need of services, they often feel they must
submit to unfair treatment. Bernice articulates her feelings about the relationship between recipients and workers as she reiterates a comment voiced by every parent I talk to.

They don't care! They don't care [voice of the worker] “Oh well, I wish I could help you. Oh well, I’m sorry I have another appointment.” They just dog you. They say they’re sorry, no they are not sorry because it’s not them. They’re not going through this problem, they have their job, and they’re on the other side of the [glass] wall. They don’t care.

This comment not only captures the sense of conflict parents feel about the role of their worker but also illustrates the power workers have over them. Such treatment is compounded by the oppressive physical setting in which interviews take place with the case worker sitting behind bullet-proof glass. This form of distancing parents from workers becomes part of the demeaning treatment parents must endure.

Clients are also judged by the way they look and the language they speak. Anna recounts an incident between an instructor and another parent.

“What are you doing here” [demeaning voice] “Well I’m going to take your class, I want to get office skills.” She says, “No you’re not ready, and you’re not the type to be here. And you don’t speak enough English.” The lady speaks real good English. But she didn’t like her because she wasn’t thin, and she wasn’t dressed like her or like the other that she had there that were not welfare to work because right there at the adult school they have people that are paying for the school, their not on Maximus It’s the paying students that have more rights there.

Apparently, a line is drawn here between those who are deserving of respectful treatment from the trainer and those who are not. In this instance, paying customers get the respect of the training staff while Welfare-to-Work clients are publicly humiliated and singled out as being unworthy of the trainers attention. The
trainer focuses on this parent's language ability as a way to stigmatize and demean her in front of the other students.

Not only are parents on welfare stigmatized as they try to participate in required work activities, but their position as "second class citizens" is continually reinforced. Poor parents retold stories of public attacks, not only based on their abilities to succeed, but also on perceived personal deficiencies of poor parents.

Again, Anna recounts an unsettling incident.

Yes, but there was a lot of other little things that I went through, and I've heard a lot of stories of people. The teachers, how the teachers treat the people there that are going to the job club. I heard that one of the ladies was saying they didn't like to go with Miss----- because she was saying that, not to get near them because people on welfare had "animals in their head" and that they were going to get contaminated and to stay away from them and not get to close to them [nervous laugh]. That's the way they see you because you're on welfare. They don't care about your situation, they don't care why you're there, they just...you're on welfare, and you're no good.

Comments such as these were not uncommon among the parents I interviewed. Several made similar comments about the treatment they received from welfare workers. However, it is important to remember that these comments go beyond just personal views of individual workers. These attitudes do not exist in a vacuum but reflect the assumptions society holds about poor parents on welfare that are reflected in the reform initiatives and the welfare politics that have created the current punitive welfare reform practices. Welfare recipients are no longer treated as regular citizens. Welfare reform programs operate to control poor parents who are viewed as people who cannot make appropriate decisions for themselves or their
families based on a white middle-class ideology. Karina vividly remembers walking into the office to apply for services.

Oh my God. They are like… it’s like going to a refugee camp. They all herd you in there, your sitting, and then they tell you that you have to be there at a certain time, you can’t be late, they tell you how you have to be dressed, what you have to do, and then everything they made us do was just like stripping our integrity, our dignity, our self respect, who we were. They made us feel like less of a person because we were getting money from the government. Oh, it was horrible...

First parents find they do not get the training they seek, and then they find they are treated “less than human.” The notion of herding people, as if they were less than human, was also a common response. Parents are often experiencing great turmoil and upheaval when they muster up the courage to walk into the office in the first place. Each parent had at least one horror story about what happened to them or someone they met that focused on humiliating treatment from the workers. This parent shares a particularly horrible story.

They [welfare recipients] were overhearing what they [workers] were telling her that they wanted to know the “saddest thing they had ever gone thorough” in their lives. And one of them said, her son had died, and that was the saddest part, and she started telling them the story. The lady started crying, and they were laughing at her [voice raised]. They were laughing at her and making fun of her and telling her, “Oh, does this really hurt, and why does it hurt” [imitating the voice of the workers]. And she said she was afraid to go in there and for them to do the same thing to her. And this lady walked out [of the welfare office], and she didn’t even go to the interview.

Practices such as this, whether officially condoned or not, serve the purpose of lowering the welfare rolls if they result in parents opting out to avoid such treatment. In any other context, this kind of pressure for self-disclosure would be considered an invasion of privacy. However, welfare recipients report frequently being monitored in this way, without regard to their rights. How many recipients, after witnessing such a scenario or experiencing it first hand, would have the courage to continue. Poor
parents on welfare are hounded to sign contracts under duress, knowing there may be consequences for their lives in the future if they do not. These experiences place recipients in a constant power struggle with workers just to survive.

**Consequences Of Welfare Reform For Parents’ Lives**

All of the welfare parents had examples of hardships they experienced as they tried to negotiate policies, practices, rules, and regulations of the new welfare reform. Rather than help parents, most of these requirements created problems for parents to solve and obstacles to getting ahead such as time limits, inadequate training, work first requirements, unending documentation, and inflexible rules that do not take the parent’s needs or circumstances into account. The problems that parents encountered as they fulfilled the various requirements of welfare reform had consequences that impact on parent’s economic situation, the relationships they have with their families, and emotional well-being in their everyday lives.

Parents daily lives are filled with complex family obligations, challenging Welfare-to- Work responsibilities, and personal chaos. Often, they lack the resources to navigate the rigid rules and regulations of the program. Sadly, many of the families who were the most distressed, found themselves with more sanctions than the families with more social support. As a consequence, parents who were worse off ended up removed from the rolls after having their cases closed for non-compliance, while parents with more personal resources to maneuver through the system had a better chance of keeping their benefits.
Economic Consequences

The economic impact of welfare reform on parents is complicated. While the obvious particulars involve the hardship of “making ends meet,” parents suggest there are many less obvious economic consequences.

Mindy was trying to make ends meet after her escape from an abusive husband. She angrily explained to me what her day-to-day juggling to make ends meet was like and the type of choices she faced.

...I'm not above pinching pennies, I'm OK with pinching pennies, but I'm not OK with being ten pennies short of making it every month... It's either the groceries that have to suffer, or, um, gas, well shoot, that can't suffer 'cause I can't get where I need to go, uh rent, well no, maybe utilities, no, you can't live without utilities, so what do you do?

Mindy continues by talking about the fact that all of the welfare-to-work activities only added more economic strain to an already overburdened economic situation.

I was spending way more [working] than I was making [with cash-aid] and then with the groceries on top of it, I said, “You know what, help me, I can't do this, I'm drowning here.”

The expenses entailed in working part-time and completing all her welfare to work activities are creating more expenses than she had before she participated in program requirements that were designed to make her self-sufficient. Clearly, the system is not working for Mindy. She is working hard to raise herself out of poverty. But in exchange for following the rules, “she is drowning.”

Tomas explains the hardships he feels as a consequence of being at the mercy of the welfare system. Even though recipients are required to follow strict rules and
guidelines to participate in the program, the welfare agency does not hold up its end of the agreement. For example, checks are frequently late, causing what Tomas calls the domino effect that places additional economic burdens on families already struggling to make ends meet.

Well, I know sometimes they would come in late [the check] or it wouldn’t come at all, and that would trigger the domino effect of household dilemmas and problems because things wouldn’t get paid on time or when they should have.

Anna, a grandmother struggling to provide for her adopted infant granddaughter, explains how she must negotiate with her landlord because the welfare system is behind on their promised assistance.

I had to talk to the landlord, to wait for me to receive my check, because I told him the changes I was going through and that that they were behind on their checks. So could they give me a chance for me to receive the checks so I could pay my rent that I was behind on.

Fortunately, Anna has an understanding landlord who will work with her.

Monica was not so fortunate. She told me her checks were repeatedly late, and that she had paid countless late charges. Finally, her landlord’s patience ran out.

...So here I am getting evicted, for what...for being late on my rent...and many times I was late because my welfare worker sent my check late...and who’s paying for their mistake, I am.

The new welfare reform does provide ancillary funds for parents when they are struggling with car repairs or other unforeseen expenses that would prevent them from completing welfare to work activities. However, as Tomas explains, the availability of these funds is often kept somewhat of a secret by the eligibility case workers.
They didn’t tell us about the [ancillary] funds. We found out about it after, but by that
time, we had to beg, borrow, and steal, just to get us through this, this….hurdle
because it’s a big financial hurdle...

Parents quite frequently told me of occasions in which they had to beg,
borrow, and sometimes even steal to make ends meet. When all of their resources
were used up, the potential was very real for parents and their children to become
homeless. Bernice and her seventeen year old son found themselves homeless after
her worker imposed sanctions because her son was accused of truancy, even though
he had been attending a charter school. Not only did Bernice become homeless but
she recalled this distressing encounter with the police that occurred at the welfare
office when trying to get this sanction straightened out.

When you homeless they [police] come in to see why you homeless. They see what’s
happening with your case, why you homeless, why you not getting any money, why
you in the street, what are you doing with the money you getting. They did that to me
in there. The police lady came and showed her badge, and I said, “My god, what
have I done wrong.” And she said, “Nothing, we’re just trying to see why you
homeless.” And I told her “You people check the records, I’m not getting enough
money to pay my rent, I couldn’t pay my rent. And I’m sanctioned, and that’s why
I’m homeless.”

Bernice’s problem—homelessness due to poverty—is, in effect, criminalized
by the involvement of a police officer to investigate the circumstances surrounding
her homelessness. At first, she internalizes this treatment, blaming herself as she
wonders what she has done wrong. She is further demeaned and blamed for her
situation by the police officer when asked what she is doing with her money. But in
the end, Bernice finds the courage to let them know she has not done anything wrong,
and that it is their mistake that she has become homeless.
Consequences for the Family

Stress is a constant in welfare parents’ lives as it is in most people’s lives today. However, their stress is connected to simply trying to support their families and at the same time to follow arduous welfare practices that families who are not on welfare do not have to endure. It seems the main difference between poor parents on welfare and those who are not on welfare are the different levels of resources available to them. Parents on welfare often have needs that overwhelm the resources that are available to them. When this happens stress impacts a situation that another family might have a resource that would remedy the problem.

The strain of being alone, raising a child, and trying to meet all the obligations of the welfare program, had stressful consequences on family relations for many parents. The parents I interviewed were saddened because they missed out on simple pleasures that many middle class families take for granted in their everyday lives. For example, having time to spend with their children is a critical issue for these parents and many felt a sense of loss over the time they were away from their children. Karina, whose husband of 18 years walked out on her and her son had this to say.

Yeah, he lost his home, he lost his father, he lost his grandfather and he lost his mother because I was all gone, gone, gone...

Trisha, a single mom who attends nursing school and worked part-time to meet her 32 hour work requirement shared this comment about its impact on herself and her son.
So I mean, and I never see him, you know, what kind of mom are you if you don’t see your kid? So, I mean, they just, they crushed me with that one. I started, that’s when I really started losing it, is because it was just like I could, I couldn’t cope

Anna, expressed her feeling of desperation and fear that her newly adopted granddaughter would not have enough food because of an unfounded sanction.

[Sighs] Oh, [nervous laugh] really bad because I was desperate because I didn’t have any money coming in, and I couldn’t go to work and, uh there was no... I was running out of the little bit of food that I had left, I was running out. And was not so worried about my self eating but my daughter eating. So I started going to the, uh... I forget the name of them... it’s, it’s [struggling] the places you go that they give you food... [food-bank]...

Joslyn told me about circumstances faced by poor women who were on AFDC where she lived when the new welfare reform requirements began. She was able to pinpoint several consequences that children and families suffered because of the new welfare policies and practices.

J: Oh God, it was horrible

S: Do you remember hearing what was going on? What kind of stuff do you remember?

J: Oh gosh [long sigh] They weren’t getting transportation and they were having to take money out of their checks to buy their bus passes to go to classes, they were not coming home, and their kids were left alone. [said with wide eyes and disbelief] And they were left in the complex. I seen a lot of alcohol come into that complex after that time, a lot of drinking, that I hadn’t seen the parents do before... A lot of drugs and a lot of drinking. People who I had seen for over a year or so and then I seen them totally change. From clean living to dirty living to make it. Wanting to be high so that they did not have to cope with it. [said in a whisper]. Some of them even lost their kids. I seen two people in that complex lose their kids.

Joslyn’s example of the progression of poor parents from “clean living to dirty” as a consequence of the coping practices parents choose is a fine example of how assumptions about welfare parents are perpetuated by policy-makers.
In the following excerpt, Karina’s insightful remarks illustrate not only the consequences of her son being marked by the stigma of the welfare but also her concerns over what will become of her child because she must leave his care to strangers when she goes out to work. Karina is experiencing what many working families struggle with as far as leaving their children in child-care. However, poor parents often have fewer options and alternatives with which to cope with the stress of it all.

And to leave our child in other people’s hands to raise. Then they wonder why there’s a lot of kids who are messed up out there and grow up and kill people. I don’t want to be in that statistic. I do not. I want my son to grow up to be a great person to add great things to society. I don’t want him to be a person that’s going to look down at the world because it’s the world taking his mom away from him because of what happened to us, because of our circumstances. He’s not responsible for that, and he’s the one who’s paying. He is the one that’s paying.

Again, Karina is painfully aware of the consequences for her son because he is a child of a welfare parent. Because she is poor and must conform to the rules and regulations of the new welfare reform, Karina feels she is unable to choose to be with her son and to provide for him. Special needs are not taken into consideration when policies are written and these hidden consequences cause Karina and other parents great distress.

I have my son in therapy now, and my son is doing really poorly in school. He’s a kid that has a learning disability, and he’s on Ritalin. He needs more special attention from me and for having to do everything that I am doing, what kind of child am I producing here? A child that’s going to have a lot of dysfunction.
Emotional Consequences

I asked Tomas what was it like dealing with all these requirements.

It was very time consuming. Transportation was a problem sometimes because, in the course of the day, your itinerary was to do certain things, and when you had these meetings to go to, um, it was just very demanding. And you compound that with home life and with these meetings that they would say... they didn’t get their monthly report or you had to come in for something, [pause] you’re just stretched, totally stretched which I know causes, [long thinking pause] causes mental and emotional fatigue on anyone who is in the program because you are living in a constant state of a “conflict of interest.”

Tomas very succinctly captures the consequences of daily life by explaining how “stretched” he feels and both the mental and physical fatigue he experienced in his day-to-day life. The demands of the program create a “conflict of interest” in an already overburdened life.

Parents constantly have to make choices about what to put first, their families or the program. Another parent explains the level of stress she feels while worrying about sanctions, trying to meet the strict verification demands of the program, and trying to care for her family without losing her benefits.

I was really stressed because you’re late, and you’re late so many times, and you are gonna be sanctioned. If you’re sick, and you don’t show up so many days or don’t have a doctor’s excuse, you’re gonna be sanctioned. Your kids are sick, you can’t miss school and stay home and take care of your kids ‘cause you’re gonna be sanctioned.

Often, through no fault of their own, recipients must think of better solutions to the welfare procedures, since the ones they have in place are often ineffective. This parent had to make special trips to the welfare office because sending her verification in did not work, and even just dropping it off did not work.
I would take it all the way to welfare, and then they said they were going to stop my aid because they didn’t receive it. Then I decided I would have to go and stand in line to get a receipt.

The kind of extra effort increased the chances of getting the full amount of her check on time but at a tremendous cost in time and energy.

Anna was one of the most empowered women I interviewed, yet she was without any means of social support such as her daughter to help her out while she was trying to meet her work and school time requirements. Repeatedly, the inflexible rules of welfare reform practices do not take into consideration the circumstances and needs of the recipients. Welfare reform practices cause insurmountable stress for parents, and when they have no social support, the consequences impact them emotionally. These demands were very stressful for Anna.

So they threaten you with all these things, and that’s very stressful. You see your child is sick, and you don’t have anybody to help. At the daycare, if they see a runny nose, they don’t take care of them, they send you home. So, what do you do then? I don’t have family here like my daughter. If my daughter was here, I know she’d take care of her, but I didn’t have her here. Who could I leave her with? So I couldn’t go to school either. And that to them wasn’t an excuse because my child had a runny nose. Very, very stressful. I’ve been going to a psychologist now because I started getting a lot of anger and anxiety and stress...

Anna was pushed by the overwhelming stress of welfare-to-work requirements into seeking help from a psychologist. In fact, more than half of the parents I spoke to sought help from psychologists and therapists to deal with the stressors in their daily lives.
Contradictory Responses To Welfare Reform

Parents respond to the impacts of welfare reform in contradictory ways. I found both a downside and an upside. In certain aspects of their lives they are willing to submit to humiliating treatment, unreasonable requests and dehumanizing practices. But, while they all were subjected to demeaning experiences, only some of the parents internalized and felt dehumanized by them, while others found new a new resilience and a sense of agency.

Downsides: Dehumanization and Giving Up

Karina describes how it feels to experience the type of negative human interactions with the workers that were so common among the parents. She has internalized the negative stereotypes of welfare recipients, and her tone seems to reflect a diminished self-worth as she shares her response.

They just don’t understand, no, no, no. It’s hell, it’s really hell, especially when they don’t want to believe in you. I feel no one believes me, nobody trusts me, nobody wants to help me. I just really feel lost.

The feeling that no one trusts her reinforces the dominant ideological assumptions about who welfare recipients are and how they should be treated. After a time, it is a short step from the feeling that “no one trust her” to the belief that she is not worthy of anyone’s trust.

Tomas describes the negative effect that such treatment has on recipients, and how common this demeaning and controlling situation is.
...it’s one thing to have to face up to a mistake that one makes, but to have to share it with strangers like a case worker who looks down on you and who humiliates you by threats and who is controlling you, and personally after hearing with my own ears and seeing with my own eyes how some of these people can be, [workers] it’s very sad.

Interestingly, Tomas seems to blame himself for the situation he is in. It is this self-blame that is perpetuated by stereotypes of welfare recipients that does the most damage and leaves so many parents feeling hopeless. It is important to note that treating parents in these ways is not just something workers as individuals decide on their own, but reflects practices carved out by workers whose job is to ensure compliance with program requirements and goals. Tomas again identifies the dehumanizing treatment of worker behavior toward recipients.

They have quotas hanging over their heads, and they know they are in a position of authority, and that they can say things to you that will make you do things you normally wouldn’t do, and I mean these people have literally said that.

Tomas is well aware that workers have quotas to meet, considering TANF’s policy outcomes to reduce welfare caseloads. However, it is the parents who must pay the price with their self worth. While some parents are able to cope with these experiences, others give up.

Trying to make a life for themselves and their families while being constantly berated by a system that seeks only to reduce its rolls leaves many of the parents I spoke to without hope of ever getting out of poverty. Monica explains how the process works for many people who feel that they are fighting a losing battle.

But yet, they’ll turn everything back on you so it’s... it’s almost like, why bother, that’s the attitude most everyone gets, you know, we’re just gonna be poor, and they should live without hope and without encouragement to go to school or just get a certificate for something they really want to do. They just figure they’ll just baby-sit
or work at a place where it’s minimum wage, and it’s a dead end job where they’re
not gonna get a raise, while their rent and everything goes up and you’re still making
minimum wage.

Trisha, is puzzled by a system where following the rules and doing
what is asked of her should be helping her gain some ground. Yet, this is not
the case and the desperation and defeat she expresses in this excerpt was
shared by several of the parents that spoke to me.

I am doing everything and more that you guys [welfare workers] are asking of me and
still it’s not enough. You know, still you want more, and I don’t have anymore to
give you guys, so it was just, I got to the point where I was like, I don’t care.

Bernice, in the following excerpt sounds as if she is in a trap with no way out.
Her physical and mental health is diminishing and she is unable to find work she can
do. She is under the impression she can no longer depend on the safety net of
welfare, yet she has no where else to turn for support and help.

I don’t know, I can’t depend on them, I say I wish I could work, I wanna work, I’m
tired of these people, I want to get off this [welfare] but I can’t afford to get off [said
with a mournful sounding voice]. If I get off, how can I find a job that... I can’t
stand for any distance, I can’t walk, I can’t stand, my pressure is high, I have anxiety
attacks [weeping] I don’t know what the hell I’m gonna do. I don’t know what to do
any more. I’m just about ready to give up. I’m tired, if I didn’t have my son..... I
would commit suicide. I tried to commit suicide.

Bernice sees that the structure of the system is the real problem and knows
what she needs to do to change her situation but is so beaten up by the humiliating
practices she has considered suicide.

..... But this welfare thing, I just hope everything gets straightened out and... and I
get back on the right track, you know, so I can get myself together. ‘Cause once I can
get the right money that I need, I can get myself together. Maybe I won’t be so sick
so much. I just want to give up, I’m so tired. I’m really tired, I am. If it wasn’t for
my son to keep me going, I’d been gone by now.
Bernice still has faith in herself that she can become self-sufficient and provide for her son, but the defeat she feels is overwhelming. Bernice, who had been homeless for several months, was baffled by the position she found herself in and was desperately trying to figure out why she could not get help. The consequences and hardships she had experienced left her feeling hopeless about her future and fearful that she might just give up.

I’m doing the right thing, trying to go the right way, and I get dogged. And I just don’t understand it. And I just get upset with everything and everybody. And that’s why I’m always mad. I always put myself down. [long sigh] What have I did wrong in my life. To suffer and go thorough this. And I look back and... I didn’t do anything wrong. I try to do the right thing, but I end up with nothing. I’ve got nothing, and I’m afraid that my disability is not gonna go though, I just don’t know, I’m just afraid, so afraid. I said, well if my disability don’t go through, my welfare, I can’t be on that much longer, I can’t get a decent job, I can’t work like I wanna work.... What am I gonna do? My son will be 17 next month, he got one more year to go. So what am I gonna do? So it worries me a lot. And I’m afraid I might commit suicide once my son gets grown. That’s what I’m afraid of.

Bernice is a primary example of how parents ends up internalizing the treatment and position they find themselves in based on the dominant ideology about who welfare recipients are. Continually pushed by the welfare system without finding any relief, she considered suicide repeatedly, as a solution to her everyday problems. Karina shares her despair about her dismal future as she saw it when she also considered suicide.

I remember when I did want to commit suicide. I remember my son was asleep, and I just felt like I don’t want to be here anymore. This is just too much. I remember trying to pick him up because I couldn’t think of leaving him behind. Then I thought how can I do that to my son? But then I thought how can I just leave him? The only reason I couldn’t get out of the house was I couldn’t carry him down three flights of stairs. That’s probably the only thing that kept me from dying. I had already decided
where I wanted to do it and how I was going to do it. I was going to jump, [or] drive off of a cliff.

Bernice, Tomas, Monica, Trisha and Karina’s situation represents the downside and the negative responses many of the parents I talked to experienced from welfare reform. Unfortunately, for some of them the only alternative they could see out of their situation was suicide. They are responding to a system that seems only to punish rather than support, internalizing its negative image as it undermines their efforts toward self-sufficiency. Yet, contradictory responses do exist, and some of the parents I talked to found positive ways to resist.

Upside: Individual Acts of Agency and Resistance

While in some cases, the impacts of welfare reform took a terrible toll on parents’ beliefs in their ability to go on, in other instances parents found unique and positive responses through individual acts of resistance. In these cases, the humiliation parents experienced had an empowering effect and contradicted the assumptions about welfare recipients and their ability the make appropriate choices. Tomas tells the story of his wife and her plan to opt out of the system. In this way, she is able to take matters into her own hands rather than let welfare control her situation.

She just wanted to cut herself, if not us, out of the program. But she was upset because she was lead to believe they would cut us off entirely! Meaning no kids, no nothing... but they would tell her they were going to cut it off... and so she was ready to throw in the towel...
A sense of agency developed within several of the parents that contradicts many of the assumptions about welfare recipients. When Mayra was told she had to quit school with only a semester to go for an Associate of Arts, she resisted.

And something inside of me said, “No. Why am I going to give up my associates degree which I’ve worked so hard for, to just give up like that?” ... I thought, too, if it just means that I have to leave off $112 to get an associate’s degree, I will.

But decisions such as these come at a cost to parents. Parents who asserted themselves while working towards their goals of true self-sufficiency repeatedly had to deal with the retaliation of their workers. In the following example, Monica told her worker she would not take a job working between the hours of three and eleven at night.

I’m not going to leave my daughter alone, even if I had a baby-sitter, because when she was a baby my own baby sitter was abusing her. I didn’t want to take the job and I don’t think I can be forced to do what they want me to do. So I refused that job, went back and I mean my worker got on me, real bad!

Monica made a decision to do what she believes is best for her daughter and refuses a job with unreasonable hours. If Monica was not on welfare, she would be praised for decision based on her daughter’s best interests. Instead, she paid a price for her act of resistance.

Anna also resisted and gained strength from her sense of agency. She believes she had fewer problems with the workers because she refused to be controlled by them. Yet, parents were acutely aware that an awareness of their rights would have been beneficial.

I guess I didn’t have that many problems maybe because I wasn’t going to let them manipulate me and do what they wanted with me. And then when I started, even
though I didn’t know my rights, a lot of my rights but, I still said no, I’m not gonna let them do that to me.

The sense that something is being “done to them” suggests that agency was often denied or almost stolen from parents. In the following example, Anna talks about choosing her own training program for a new job opportunity. She has thought it out and states she will not let her case worker control her or make her choices for her future.

[Strongly said] I picked it. I didn’t let them [worker] ... [pauses, thinking for the right word] take control of me. I more or less took control of the situation because I thought, if I’m gonna work, and I’m gonna be self-sufficient, I want something that I love to do. So that I get up every morning and go to my job, you know. If they put you in, in, a training, and they put you to do something “they like” and not what you like, then you’re not gonna be happy. And you’re going to have problems going to work and getting up and all that. So I didn’t want that to happen.

Anna very clearly pinpoints a critical problem with the way welfare reform is structured. Welfare recipients are regularly placed in a position of submission, being told what to do, how to think, and what choices to make about their own futures. Anna recognizes it is her future and that it should be her decision. Making her own decision empowers her, and her act of resistance is an invaluable tool. Anna’s statement represents the commonalty that welfare parents share with other parents trying to make an informed decision about their futures.

Some of the parents used a more passive form of resistance to get around rules that limit their choices. They made comments like, “Oh, I just played their game,” or “When they called I didn’t answer the phone.” Mayra told this story about her worker trying to get her to sign her contract before her child was born. However, she learned
through the SPIN that when she signed, her clock, for time limits on her receipt of aid, would start ticking. She said that at first when the worker called her, she pretended she did not understand what she wanted, “So I just played dumbbell.” After a while the worker tried a new technique.

Why don’t you come in to my office and sign it [Welfare-to-Work contract] so you can have everything ready, and then when your baby [arrives], when the baby’s old enough you won’t have to come back in.

Practices such as these are common among workers. However, because Mayra was aware of how the system works, she was able to stall her worker, to “buy more time” on her welfare to work time clock.

Small acts of resistance such as these empowered parents. Monica, was aware of the consequences that could occur when a welfare to work contract is signed without understanding it.

But she asked me to sign things, and I said no [said very nonchalant] I don’t have to. I kinda rubbed them the wrong way a lot, you know. I didn’t let them get away with anything.

To many people, refusing to sign a binding legal contract without understanding, or taking the time to read it sounds like a very logical, proactive and responsible thing to do. But, for a welfare parent who is continually being monitored, regulated, and controlled, these acts of individual resistance are courage actions.
Workers Who Made a Difference “Finding Allies on the Inside”

Not all advocacy help came from outside sources. While relationships between workers and parents were often difficult, some workers made a positive difference in parents’ lives. Each time a parent related this kind of discovery they were shocked because it was such a rarity. On the other hand, they took it in stride and were happy to find someone on their side to help. Joslyn expresses her amazement at finding such a supportive person, who was a director, within the system.

... she was the director and she said, “Nobody had the right to treat you like you’re not a person.” And she was very good about that. And she was part of the county, and you don’t find it often because they really don’t give a damn about you.

Tomas also found inside support and suggests that some workers are willing to be rule breakers and want to give parents more information than the county allows.

“I’m not supposed to tell you this but, this is an option” or “There is an alternative route we can go to resolve this particular situation, but don’t say that I told you.” But, for those who are fortunate, they’ll get that once in a blue moon case worker who is sincere and trying to help you and do their job, whereas most of them, they’re just doing what they have the power to do....

Tomas makes the assumption that workers who are helpful are “doing their job,” and that the majority who are not are mainly caught up in the power dynamics of their position. However, it appears that these workers are rule-breakers who resist mandated policy to withhold information about rights and services to which parents are entitled unless it’s specifically requested.

Mindy explains how a particular CalWORKs case manager (who is stationed on a community college campus) intervenes on behalf of parents when they have problems.
S: So the CalWORKs people, do they work directly with your worker and intervene when it's necessary?

M: Yes she works with the case manager, she works with your counselor at school, she works with everybody.

S: So if you have a problem, you go to her?

M: Right, she's really good.

S: What do you think it would have been like without someone like that? [huge moan] Probably a lot of people wouldn't have been able to stay. Because some people were just three months into their plan, I mean, with three months left, and then it's time for them to be off, and she really works to keep them there to finish that degree, she really works hard for that. She intervenes in a lot of cases...

Social support and advocacy can come from a variety of places, but one thing seems clear: without advocacy or support, parents on welfare are left alone to negotiate a system of bureaucratic obstacles and hardships consisting of demeaning practices and inflexible rules that do not take into account their family needs and circumstances.

Parents Support One Another

Parents in the welfare system are constantly put in a position to submit to someone else’s wishes. There is regularly an outside force requiring parents to behave in particular ways and do particular tasks while trying to maneuver through the welfare reform system. This forced position of submission continues to reinforce the dominant ideology about welfare recipients as dependent and unable to make choices for themselves. As discussed above, parents are often afraid to challenge those who hold power over the lives, such as eligibility workers and mandatory
training instructors, while others engage in acts of individual resistance. However some parents are willing to challenge the rules, not only on their own behalf, but to get others involved as well. Joslyn was very proactive in networking with other parents when they found someone sympathetic from within the welfare organization.

I put a notes [up] in the laundry rooms at the complex, if you have any problems with these things call... and I put the lady’s name down that was head of the welfare office. I said there is someone that listens, because I’ve gotten help from her.

Joslyn tells another story about an incident involving a request to sign blank welfare to work contracts.

So, after the test I noticed that these papers are being sent around to everybody [voice gets low and quiet, like a whisper] They were blank contracts, blank contracts with just a place to sign your name. And I was livid and they said, “You have to sign these before you leave.” [voice gets loud and defiant] I said, “Oh, I don’t think so.” Yeah, and from then on, they [the county social services]... it was like war on me. I told everybody in there, “Do you sign a blank contract to buy a car or anything else?” One girl said, “I already have a contract, but they said they can’t find it.” I said, “Well so, you better have them make up that contract the same way the other contract was made out before you sign it. Because if you sign it blank, they can put what ever they want in it.” So they[workers] were kinda annoyed with me. The next week I got a letter, I was being investigated for fraud! [laughs] They said I was just picked random.

In this example, Joslyn puts herself on the line and eventually does receive repercussions because of her attempt at collective resistance. Interestingly, one of the women explains that she has already signed a contract. Here, parents are treated in a way no other citizen would be expected to tolerate. But, threatening welfare parents to comply is easy because of the stigmatized and relatively powerless position they are in. Therefore, the refusal to sign a contract is quite an act of defiance.
Anna explained how the participants, in another risky act of collective resistance, questioned why the job search trainers didn’t have to comply with the workforce dress code.

A: We brought it up to them, “You guys are not even wearing skirts.”

S: What did they say?

A: “Oh well, we don’t have to comply to this rule, you guys have to. We have to get you ready for the work force.”

Most of the oppressive rules of welfare-to-work reflect the assumptions that propelled welfare reform in the first place. Poor parents are supposedly unable to make appropriate decisions and therefore the welfare system must make them for them. Even a simple decision about what is suitable attire for the work place is imposed on them. These power relations the parents must fight within the welfare system reflect the same power dynamics they must deal with in their everyday lives because they are poor. This struggle to control their own lives and decisions for their families impacted the parents in a number of ways, both implicitly and explicitly.

The courage welfare recipients need to muster to resist is remarkable considering the oppressive environment in which they continually find themselves. This parent tells about a particular worker with whom she had trouble, and describes how she reported him and made a bold effort to share her experiences with others.

“And anybody that has this worker, and he’s not treating you right, REPORT IT.” Because people are afraid to report, when they’re abused, and this man [her worker] was abusing me, I would not tolerate it!
Anna, the grandmother who had adopted her granddaughter, was reprimanded by the workers for advocacy that included giving recipients information about their rights. But Anna was determined to get the word out and let others know they were not alone.

[voice gets loud] It made me angry because, you know, I was trying to show these people that they’re not alone and not to be afraid. And they [county workers] didn’t want me to let them know and to give them the information. But I still got [to] them. If I didn’t get them on the inside, I got them on the outside. I told them,[other parents] “You’re not alone, fight. Don’t let them yell at you and do these things to you.”

These are clearly defiant acts of courage. Can we expect every parent to take chances such as these to fight and resist and risk worker retribution, sanctions, or loss of benefits entirely? Poor parents on welfare have much to lose and not much to gain by resisting without the support of an advocacy organization to back them up. As the parents told their welfare reform stories, one common thread they all seemed to share was the consciousness raising and empowerment they obtained once they had contact with SPIN.

**Collective Resistance Through SPIN**

There is something incredibly inspiring about the fact that people placed in such precarious social positions still demonstrate that they want to be part of something larger than themselves. As discussed earlier, SPIN is a grassroots welfare rights advocacy group made up of low income parents supporting each other while they deal with welfare reform issues. SPIN’s mission is to develop the independence,
resourcefulness, and power of parents on welfare to move them toward self-sufficiency and to increase their participation in decisions affecting their lives, the lives of their families, and those in their community (SPIN News, 1999).

SPIN provides a sense of community for parents who are often left feeling isolated and stigmatized for being on public assistance. SPIN has occasional meeting as needed for parents to come together to share information and support each other. SPIN members also have participated in outreach activities and lobbying efforts. Joni Halpern, the director of SPIN, is a former ACLU lawyer who left that position to start SPIN after her experiences representing parents at welfare sanction hearings. Mayra, a mother of three and a past welfare recipient of ten years, is currently one of the SPIN parent leaders. She remembers going to a welfare reform forum and listening to other women on welfare tell their stories to one of the original designers of the new legislation.

M: Well, the next day, I went to the welfare reform forum, and Denise Ducheny was there, and she was basically there to feel and hear how great this welfare reform was working, and she got the other side of the coin…

S: So people were telling her about some of the problems they had come across?

M: Yes, the time limits and that some of the majors weren’t being approved for associate degrees….

Mayra continues:

And there was this lady, Joni Halpern [SPIN director], and she said, “I’m an attorney, and this is what the law says, and this is what the women are falling under and this is what is happening to them.” And I just sat there and listened, and I knew for the first time that there was somebody on our side.
“Someone on our side,” how simple yet poignant these words sound coming from Mayra. In that split second, everything changed for Mayra when she realized there was an organization and people who cared about what happened to her.

Joslyn describes the birth of SPIN at a support group meeting for students from the Cal WORKS program who were attending classes at local colleges.

J: They want to start something up about people having problems with the welfare and legal aid, and it was all the colleges, some from City College, some were from [San Diego] State, some were from Southwestern.

S: And they were all people on aid?

J: Yes, collectively meeting together.

S: How many people were there?

J: About 20 or 25, there was a lot of us there and it even got bigger, to the point that we was standing... and I said, “Wow, so many people...” [voice trails off].

S: So how did you come up with the name? We said, “Well, we know we are supporting, we are supporting parents, so we had those two. And we were gonna be networking. [voice gets strong and loud] we were networking in the room as it was, so we got that information network right into it. ... Joni put [on the board] S.P...I.N..SPIN. “Supportive Parents Information Network.”

The birth of a grassroots organization conceived by the parents on welfare is a welcome form of advocacy and support. The words describing SPIN (“Supportive Parents Information Network”) have all the elements that the parents I spoke to needed.

Monica, who was about to be evicted when we had our interview because her checks were continually late, praised her involvement with SPIN and the strength she gained knowing that she was not alone.

And then, when I joined the SPIN, I found out more, and that helped me, I, that made me feel stronger, and knowing more rights, and that I wasn’t alone.
Mindy shares how SPIN empowered her to fight for her children. She is aware of how hard she must struggle to get the simple necessities of life most middle class people take for granted. She anticipates that even though those in power will not like her resistance, she has learned to fight for what is due to her.

You can push me around a bit here and there, tell me no, but when you neglect my kids or tell them no, and it’s something they need like food, shelter or both, you know what, you can hit the high road, and I will find a way, I’ll find a way to get your help, and you won’t be smiling at me, but it’ll be legal, and you will have to. And thank god that I went to Joni’s class, ’cause I would not have known half of that either.

Becoming a member of SPIN is not a formal procedure. In essence, it entails a willingness to help others once parents have themselves received help from SPIN. This mission helps to promote a sense of belonging among the parents and the realization that no one should have to go through this experience alone. SPIN is more than a social service agency that helps those in need. One important principle of SPIN is that it takes the next step, by acknowledging and building on parents’ strengths and by encouraging them to reach out and help other parents in their struggles with welfare reform. Several parents mentioned that helping others somehow eased their own problems.

Joslyn was the oldest and most politically savvy parent I interviewed. She had been involved in advocacy throughout her life and considered herself one of the first SPIN members. She intervened for a fellow student who was not getting her needs met.

One of the other girls that I worked with, she had a lot of trouble with her worker also. And she tried for over a year to get direct deposit, meanwhile she had to go to a check cashing place and pay 10 or 15 dollars to cash her check. But because she was
Russian, and she doesn’t want to make waves and things like that, she said nothing. And they were really dogging her. So I got on the phone and I told them, “I’m a student advocate, and I have a student who feels like she is not being understood by you, so I’m a mediator here. And I’m gonna give you these things that she needs done because she feels like her language… you don’t understand her accent, and we’re gonna see if we can work these problems out.”

Joslyn very nicely pointed out several reasons why parents often do not speak up for themselves. In the first place, this parent is being viewed through the welfare lens by her worker and already receiving unsatisfactory treatment; second, this treatment is affecting her financially, and she fears retribution; and finally, she is aware that her language may be creating a barrier to the worker as well. Armed with knowledge of welfare rights, Joslyn steps in and in a professional manner advocates for her friend.

Anticipating the problems that other parents would have, Anna, also took matters into her own hands by making SPIN business cards to hand out to other parents she met.

... I made myself some little papers, like business cards, with Joni, and Mayra and my telephone number on them, and left them and told them [parents] to get in touch if they had any problems. Maybe right now you don’t have any, but you will have some. So when you have some problems, just give any one of these three a call, and we’ll help you. And a lot of them did call. I haven’t seen them because I don’t go to school any more, but I hope they got their problems settled. But it’s been really hard, going through this.

Throughout the interview, Monica told me how much helping others helped her to keep her head above water. SPIN allows parents who have been told they have no voice, no rights, and no power to find their voice, and to use it not only to help themselves but by reaching out to other parents as well.
And that made me go and help the other ones that are with more problems. [voice gets louder] Looking at the other problems that the other women had made like my problems were nothing!

This form of advocacy and outreach for others illustrates the skill building and consciousness raising power of social support by an organization such as SPIN. Parents on welfare who are considered weak and unable or unwilling to make informed choices are able to come together based on their “shared location” and unique insight into the problems and obstacles they encounter on a daily basis.

Anna explains how she has become more empowered since her membership in SPIN.

Now that I joined the SPIN, well I started learning a lot about my rights, and I started spreading the word around and letting them[recipients] know they have rights, and they weren’t alone. They [welfare workers] sanction them for anything. They [parents] can go to the SPIN and that they would help them.

Repeatedly, parents expressed the realization of “not being alone” as their most powerful response to finding SPIN. Tomas also talks about the empowering effect of SPIN’s advocacy on his behalf and how “knowing someone who knows” can make such a difference.

There’s a world of information that one needs to know in order to succeed, and if you don’t, if you’re not blessed with being surrounded by people who know or people who can lead you to someone who knows, you’re going alone.

Anna believes she received special treatment at the welfare office because of her association with SPIN, but, even if her perception was wrong, it still had an empowering effect on her. She told me during our interview that she feels she can hold her head up now that she is in SPIN. This kind of support and simple human recognition is invaluable for parents on welfare who believe they are all alone.
So she [CalWORK director] knows me, she knows I’m with SPIN, and I’m with Joni. [SPIN director] She sees me and hugs me, she kisses me, and she treats me really nice.

At the end of every interview I asked the parents how they heard about SPIN and what kind of effect this advocacy group had on their lives. Several parents expressed that without SPIN’s advocacy efforts, they never would have been able to negotiate the complicated welfare system. Those with support fared better than those who did not, and SPIN has become a very important part of that support for its members.

It was usually through word of mouth that parents heard about SPIN. Once someone had made the SPIN connection, they passed the word on to others. But, beyond just spreading the word, what is so powerful about SPIN is the effort parents make to recruit others to attend meeting and receive help, as they did.

Through a friend, a friend of a friend who introduced us to SPIN. I mean we owe [choked up] anybody who is affiliated with SPIN there is just a an indescribable gratitude. It was very stressful, when you’re in that position you’re repressed, your a little depressed, and you suppress all these feeling of injustice through the way things are and, um, you just... I don’t know how other people make it, without it [SPIN].

This parent mirrors the words of most of the parents I spoke to about the power of social support and advocacy.

And the only reason that I was effective in generating a positive outcome was because of my awareness of SPIN and the information they provided me.

Tomas very movingly explains the significance SPIN has had on his life.

T: Had it not been for meeting people who were affiliated with SPIN and with SPIN itself [long pause, choked up]

S: It changed your whole outlook having some advocacy on your side?
T: I would go so far as to say it's a life altering experience. A positive one [smiling] knowing that you have rights, and you can go in there and make a positive change for yourself.

S: So you've been able to tell other people about that and spread the word.

T: Right, right, you just can't express what [struggling for the right words] what, what the information has done to the situation and to us as individuals and as a family and as a community of those who are involved with SPIN now, it's unreal! Without SPIN I think this accomplishment would have been very delayed. It just would have, there is just no way it could have been achieved.

SPIN's intervention helped parents recognize that they had choices and options about the direction of their lives. Sharing lived experiences at SPIN meetings gave parents the courage to use their voices on their own behalf. Welfare puts people in a place where they have no power. By embracing their own power, SPIN helped them to find their voice to advocate for others. They often did not seem to realize the power they held until coming in contact with other SPIN parents with the same issues and problems. This commonality served to dispel many of the stereotypes parents on welfare hold about each other.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research is to understand from an insider's point of view the lived experiences of parents going through welfare reform. As a sociologist, I was interested in recent welfare reform policy and public discourse that, based on the number of people removed from the welfare rolls, had touted welfare reform an
unprecedented success. But was welfare reform ending poverty? Based on what I learned from listening to parents, welfare reform seemed to be serving a particular set of interests, not those necessarily of parents going through the program.

My journey to this understanding began when I was introduced to Joni Halpern and the welfare advocacy organization she directs called SPIN (Supportive Parents Information Network). I began to attend SPIN meetings and met and listened to the problems and experiences of SPIN members as they were dealing with welfare reform. SPIN members were working to get the word out about injustices and infractions of the rules and regulations of the new welfare reform, and providing support and advocacy for each other. At SPIN meetings I listened to the problems welfare reform was causing parents as they worked to support their families and to become self-sufficient. From their stories I could see that, within a context of welfare reform discourse, something was missing. Missing were the voices of those most affected by this new policy change-- poor parents living through welfare reform.

The efforts of Joni Halpern and of SPIN members to meet and discuss welfare reform policies and practices with county officials and policy makers were met with requests asking her to show them “the data.” Without research documenting the widespread problems that parents encountered, their experiences could be dismissed as “exceptions” or extreme cases that were not representative of widespread problems and policy violations. In order to gather data that would make statements about the lives of parents more credible, SPIN decided to conduct a survey in which members were asked about their experiences under welfare reform.
But, as a qualitative sociologist, I knew that as valuable as that survey will be in documenting broad trends, my study provides an understanding of the processes people go through that lead to these outcomes. It also provides an understanding of what is left out of surveys-- the human dimension of what it is like to live through welfare reform. Therefore, this research brings to light the struggles, problems, and successes of parents; identifies the positive and negative outcomes of reform; and makes recommendations for ways to improve welfare reform programs.

This study contributes an understanding of what parents are seeking when they arrive at the welfare line, what they understand will be provided for them, and what they ultimately receive as far as costs and benefits toward self-sufficiency. This research indicates that welfare reform is creating more hardships and obstacles for parents than it is providing. While Federal, State, and County governments are singing the praises of roll reduction and the economic benefits they are collecting through TANF incentives, reform is taking a toll both economically and emotionally on parents. Welfare reform is not a success and the voices of these struggling parents provide the reason why.

All the SPIN parents had recommendations and thoughts on how the new welfare reform system could be improved based on the experiences they had been through. At the conclusion of my interviews, I asked parents to tell me what kind of message they would like to send the people running the welfare system. Below, I let most of the comments from the parents speak for themselves. Then I follow up with some suggestions of my own.
RECOMMENDATIONS:
“If I could tell them, this is what I would say”

They need to “walk in our shoes.”

This parent seems to have removed herself from issues such as welfare reform and poverty until she had to experience it for herself. Perhaps she was someone who accepted the deficit model about parents on welfare until she saw the strength needed to succeed in such a system. She sees a need for greater empathy and understanding for welfare parents situations and individual needs. Her message is for everyone.

As a single mother, no one knows what poor people go thorough...we can never bridge the gap until “they can walk in our shoes.” I wasn’t always like this and I never would have known if I didn’t have to live through this so I’m glad in a way to be suffering, so I know what they go through.

“We’re going there to seek help.”

Monica points out something many of the parents mentioned. Parents go to eligibility workers seeking help not demeaning treatment, and they wish workers would treat them with respect.

People need to get help [voice is strong and angry] Listen to them. OK, apparently, they’re workers, they are there because of us. It seems as if they are giving money out of their check. That’s how we feel. But they are there because of us, and if they don’t like that job, I’m pretty sure they could get another job. They should be a bit more... they should learn to communicate with the people because we’re going there to seek help. They should learn to communicate with us because we are the client. They just demand, you don’t demand this, you ask.

“When your client tells you something, please trust them.”
Bernice’s recommendation is simple, just have some faith in your clients and do not assume they are lying to you. Over and over, parents stated they just wanted to remove themselves from the stereotypes welfare parents are accused of.

S: If you could be part of writing a new system what do you think you’d like to tell them?

B: I would tell them, when your client tells you something, please trust them and believe in them because most of them are telling the truth, most of them is not lying. Because the worker that I have they think that I’m not, they think I’m not telling the truth and I don’t think it’s fair. The first thing they think is you do not want to work. You know a lot of people wants to work, but a lot of people do want to work. Just, just, … have a little faith in them, and trust in them, and just give then a chance.

“Any special programs for grandmothers?”

Joslyn recommends paying attention to the special needs of grandmothers and other family members who are often caring for children.

I need to find out if there are any special programs for grandmothers. No one ever offered any special help.

“I want to be able to help those who are standing behind me.”

Karina was angry at the treatment she received and did not want others to go through what she did and be denied their rights. She wants all parents to be aware of their educational options.

I want to get involved, I want to speak out, I want to be active, I want to be able to help all of those who are standing right behind be. People that are signing up for welfare now. I want them to know their rights. I want them to know what it is really that welfare can do for them and what they should do for them. Not just by giving them whatever by telling them that they can just get whatever kind of job. They should let everyone know that education is available for any of them that want it.

“Educate workers on what our rights are.”

Trisha had a similar recommendation.
If there is anything you’re going to be able to do with this research, if you could educate the workers on what our rights are, ‘cause they don’t know. Tell them [parents] that there are better things out there...

“They should tell you exactly what is going on.”

Tomas believed that workers should be held accountable for their actions and be required to offer all the options available to parents. Again there is a plea for being treated with respect and to understand the situation parents find themselves in.

I think people in that position should be held accountable as to not only the information they present but in the manner in which they present it because if... I think I say this objectively, that is just no way to talk to somebody, whether their working or not, it was just...[long pause] it was just not good. It was very condescending is the word that really applies here. As if you are second rate, they don’t realize how fortunate they are to be in a position to be stable employment and when they are dealing with the less disenfranchised that they should be a little bit more... understanding of their situation, because putting them down and talking to them like as if they’re not as good as you is more detrimental than it is helping them. If their job is to assist someone who is less fortunate then they should present a positive attitude and when they tell them “Just take any job, or you only have a year, or two years or you’re going to be off so you better go take this job.” They’re sending a half truth of information that shouldn’t be exercised. They should tell you exactly what is going on.

My Recommendations

Welfare policies need to be oriented to reduce poverty for parents and not just reduce the welfare rolls. “Ending welfare as we know it” is not lifting parents above the poverty line. All the parents I interviewed are all still living below the poverty line, and not one of them was able to find a job making a living wage.

Welfare reform's success should be measured by the level of self-sufficiency parents believe they are achieving, and not measured by caseload reduction. The use of qualitative studies such as this one can add to the body of knowledge that informs
welfare reform and helps to demystify who people on welfare are, what they need, and how they are surviving.

We need to begin to recognize and value the work that parents, mostly women, do in the home, and stop devaluing it by push poor women out into the workforce. Stop forcing poor parents to take jobs based on middle class assumptions of what poor women should spend their time doing, and begin to value all work including work in the home and work raising children.

Poor parents on welfare seek meaningful training and educational opportunities so they can obtain jobs that pay a living wage. When these services and programs are offered and then unable to deliver what was promised to parents, many became defeated by the process. States are being rewarded bonus funds for reducing the rolls. These generous funds should be used to provide more resources and access to what poor parents want and need.

A portion of these funds might be used to train parents on welfare as nurses. California is in the middle of a serious nursing shortage. CalWORKs recipients could begin training in programs that would truly lift them above the poverty line and into a respected career, such as License Practical Nurse or Registered Nurse. Although, many of current training programs offered push women into Certified Nurses Assistance positions, these jobs do not pay a living wage and offer no room for advancement.

Several of the parents mentioned they would like to be case managers or welfare eligibility workers. They felt they could bring a level of shared experiences
and commonality to the job that is currently lacking. Training and hiring poor parents on welfare would also help recipients who are still receiving benefits to see that there is a future for them. One of the biggest problems parents shared about the workers was their lack of understanding based on the context of their lives and on the inability to take into account what parents live through. The parents I interviewed believed they would not use the “welfare lens” while attempting to help other recipients because they have an understanding of the harm this approach has.

Another suggestion that would make going through the welfare system more beneficial would be to give the workers more flexibility to be creative problem solvers. Some of the parents found workers who were willing to operate outside the institutional constraints placed on them. Worker who were viewed as “rule breakers” were able to contribute positive reinforcement to parents and helped to solve problems while offering genuine support. Yet, why must this be done covertly? Although they have similar problems, every poor parent also has issues that are unique to their social situation. If workers are able to partner with recipients to understand the context of their situations, problem solving might have more positive results. Rather than creating a punitive, people processing environment based solely on “compliance,” welfare workers need tools to help support parents.

CONCLUSION

Parents I interviewed turned to welfare to help support their families and to find a job that would lead to self-sufficiency. They were motivated to succeed but
found that the mandated Welfare-to-Work programs did not deliver the tangible help they were promised. Parents expected opportunities to improve their economic situations through assessment, educational training, and assistance in getting jobs that would pay a living wage.

Instead, they encountered rigid rules that do not take into account their needs and situations, training that wasted their time, demeaning treatment from workers, and constant threat of sanctions and loss of benefits if they did not fulfill program requirements. Parents were positive, willing to work, and a bit apprehensive going into these training programs but became discouraged after they realized the programs often created more problems than they solved. As a consequence, a number of parents experienced emotional and physical stress, increased financial burdens, and were constantly put in the position of choosing between family and welfare obligations.

But one thing is clear: Rather than people who are dependent and unable or unwilling to make informed choices for themselves I found, strong and resourceful problem solvers who are devoted to children and families. But welfare reform has contradictory effects. While many of the parents were able to overcome adversity, at other times it all became too much for them. Some parents internalized the belief's that propelled welfare reform in the first place and started to accept the dominate ideology that they deserve to be poor and are worthless. This self-blame helps to perpetuate the stereotypes about welfare recipients. Many of the parents felt so much despair and powerlessness over their situation that they spoke of opting out of the
welfare system, giving up, and suicide. Yet, the strong values they expressed about children and doing what is best for them, “no matter what” creates even stronger incentives for them to not give up and continue with their struggle.

A strong work ethic and family values that parents on welfare hold contradict both the stereotypical images held by the general public and the culture of poverty and dependency literature. The significance of my research is that while both welfare policy and the scholarly writing on which it is based find weakness in welfare parents, my research finds strengths.

Parents were able to find individual or community social support to help them through the difficult times because of organizations like SPIN and the outreach of SPIN members. SPIN members were often able to switch power from the worker to themselves by knowing their own rights and taking back the power they lost. Parents responded to their new found empowerment with courageous acts of individual and collective resistance.

Programs like SPIN are invaluable according to SPIN parents as they compared their situations before and after involvement with SPIN. The overwhelming reason parents embraced SPIN was that it made them feel that they were not all alone. Repeatedly, they said everything changed when they found out someone “out there” cared. This sense of belonging to something larger than oneself was a concept parents responded to positively. And, beyond a sense of community was the consciousness raising power of social support women experienced belonging to an organization such as SPIN. The impact of advocacy cannot be dismissed.
Organizations such as SPIN provide an important link for poor parents to come together as a community while finding their voices through acts of individual and collective resistance. By creating coalitions with other advocacy organizations and like-minded academics, Joni Halpern and SPIN members’ efforts will continue to make a difference in poor parents lives. It is my hope that this research will assist SPIN members as they fight for welfare rights for all.

The work of welfare reform is far from done. As we approach re-authorization of welfare in 2002, the voices of the parents who shared their experiences and other like them must be included in the conversation. A shift must occur from a focus on individual deficiencies to economic and structural constraints met by poor parents, especially women. Parents on welfare have wisdom based on their social location and their lived experiences that have been excluded from the welfare conversation. Excluding their perspectives is harmful and continues to devalue and perpetuate stereotypes about parents on welfare.

While re-authorization for current legislation is due for review in the coming months of 2001, it seems almost inevitable to continue on the current path of “ending welfare as we know it,” while ignoring structural factors that always contribute to poverty. If this is the direction policy-makers go in, SPIN’s intervention program of education and advocacy will be much needed.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, -(42 U.C.S.A. ) HR3734. Sec.# 201(A)1 (AKA-Welfare Reform Act).


[www.acf.dhhs.gov]