Returns to Welfare Under Welfare Reform: Early Patterns and Their Implications

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ABSTRACT. The federally-imposed lifetime limit on cash assistance receipt compels program administrators to examine returns to welfare after an exit. We explore recidivism among a random sample of 2,665 Maryland families who left welfare between October 1996 and December 1997. Using administrative data, we compare the demographic characteristics, welfare histories, and work histories of recidivists and non-recidivists. Results indicate that most families do not return to welfare within a year. However, almost one-third do return, often within the first 30 days. This rarely investigated "administrative churning" phenomenon is important because of the federal time limit, the valuable agency resources which are consumed in handling churning cases and the possible negative consequences of churning on family well-being. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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The historic Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA, P.L. 104-196) of 1996, familiarly known as "welfare reform," abolished the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. In its place the Act established Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), through which, using federal funds provided in the form of block grants, states have been empowered to design their own cash assistance programs within generally broad federal parameters.

Among the many differences between the old and new programs is the imposition of limits on receipt of federally-subsidized welfare payments. In contrast to AFDC where benefit receipt was open ended, PRWORA limits cumulative cash assistance receipt to five years or 60 months during adulthood; once this threshold is crossed, these adult's households are no longer eligible to receive federally-funded cash assistance. States may continue to provide cash assistance beyond the five-year mark, but must use their own funds to do so. States are also free, under PRWORA, to set time limits less than the five-year federal maximum.[1]

Time limiting cash assistance receipt clearly requires program administrators to pay close attention to how long individuals receive welfare. Understandably, most attention has focused on clients at risk of hitting the 60-month mark in one long, continuous spell. Over time, however, a much larger group, those who intersperse spells of being on welfare with periods of being off welfare, is also at risk of reaching the 60-month threshold. It seems imperative then that an essential, practical part of attending to time clock issues must include concerted efforts to prevent recidivism or returns to welfare by those who have exited.[2] The success of these efforts, in turn, requires empirical data which describe the extent of welfare returns among those exiting under new program rules, document the timing of returns, and at least preliminarily identify what the recidivism risk factors appear to be in the new welfare era. The purpose of the present study is to examine the prevalence and correlates of returns to welfare among a sample of Maryland families leaving TANF during the first 15 months of reform and to outline some programmatic implications of these patterns in the now time-limited world of public welfare.

Background

Recidivism was common under the old cash assistance program, AFDC. Estimates of the incidence of AFDC recidivism vary somewhat, but generally studies show that at least one-third and perhaps as many as two-thirds of all AFDC exiters experienced at least one subsequent welfare spell (see, for example, Blank and Ruggles, 1993; Cao, 1996; Ellwood, 1986; Greenberg, 1993; Harris, 1996; Pavetti, 1993; Weeks, 1991). The author's analysis of AFDC recidivism in Maryland found that nearly half (47%) of all exits from a first welfare spell resulted in at least a second spell of welfare receipt over a nine-year period (Born, Caudill and Cordero, 1998). Under AFDC it was also true that returns to welfare tended to happen quickly. The Maryland study showed that one in three recidivists returned to welfare within six months of exit; about half who returned did so within 12 months. These results are consistent with other studies' findings that, nationwide, many families who returned to welfare did so within a year of exit (Blank and Ruggles, 1993; Brandon, 1995).

Welfare recidivism research is still a fairly new area of inquiry, to which virtually no research attention was paid until Ellwood's landmark studies in the mid-1980s (Bane and Ellwood, 1983; Ellwood, 1986). While the situation has improved since then, the literature on recidivism is still relatively sparse. Most studies investigating AFDC dynamics have focused on identifying factors associated with individual's entry onto means-tested programs, their propensity to have short or long welfare spells, and/or their likelihood of exiting from welfare. Likewise, many welfare use studies have been restricted to analyses of single spells of benefit receipt. Others, while examining total time on welfare (i.e., lifetime use), generally ignored breaks in welfare receipt, especially those of short duration (see, for example, Cancian, Haveman, Kaplan, Meyer, and Wolfe, 1999; Harris, 1996; Meyer and Cancian, 1998). Indeed, when welfare receipt was open-ended (i.e., there were no time limits), the generally accepted research convention was to disregard gaps in cash assistance receipt of less than 30, 60 or even 90 days. The assumption was that, in most cases, these short periods of non-receipt were not true exits from welfare, but rather "administrative churning," benefit non-receipt caused by such events as missed appointments or non-compliance with paperwork submission deadlines.

In contrast, in today's time-limited welfare world every month on (or off) welfare is critically important vis-à-vis the 60-month federal lifetime limit on benefit receipt. Thus, for methodological reasons alone, findings from AFDC-based recidivism research studies may offer little guidance in the TANF era. To this uncertainty is added the great unknown of behavioral changes that some observers believe the PRWORA/TANF changes may produce in client's patterns of welfare use.

Much of the emerging TANF literature on welfare recidivism fails to acknowledge this reality and continues to ignore breaks in receipt less than 60 days (Acs and Loprest, 2001; Cancian, Haveman, Kaplan, and Wolfe, 1998; Coulton, Su, Bania and Wang, 1998; Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2001). This research likely understates rates of returning to TANF. For program administrators, accurate information on TANF returns is essential to assessing families' risk of reaching the time limit. Moreover, the human and financial costs associated with repeatedly opening and closing cases may become even higher if TANF funding is reduced as part of the impending TANF reauthorization process. While funding could be cut, caseloads may begin to rise if a widespread economic slowdown does in fact, materialize. Should either or both of these events occur, welfare program managers will face challenges heretofore not seen in the post-PRWORA era.

In an environment characterized by such uncertainties, recidivism is an important area deserving administrative attention because it is a program activity that consumes resources in the process of case closings and re-openings, but does not achieve desired outcomes for families or the program. For these reasons and because the stakes are so high for individual families and TANF programs, it seems imperative that a new body of recidivism research be developed, based on data about welfare exits and welfare returns under the new state-based, time-limited welfare systems now in place. Using data on welfare recidivism among a random sample of 2,665 families who exited during the first 15 months of post-TANF cash assistance in one state, this paper makes a beginning contribution to our much-needed knowledge about recidivism in the new welfare era. Three research questions guided the analysis: (1) How many families return to welfare after an exit? (2) Does recidivism risk vary by case closing reason? and (3) Do those who return differ from those who do not return?

METHOD

Setting

The study state, Maryland, began its TANF program in October 1996. Maryland's welfare system is state-supervised, locally-administered. The state Department of Human Resources establishes eligibility requirements, benefit levels and other general policies. Within these broad parameters, the 24 local jurisdictions have considerable flexibility in program design and implementation.

Consistent with other states, Maryland's welfare program embodies a "work first" approach. TANF clients who are not exempt from work activities are required to participate as soon as possible. Clients who do not comply with work participation or child support enforcement cooperation requirements receive a full family sanction, or removal of the entire cash assistance grant. Maryland adopted the federal 60-month lifetime limit on receipt of federally-funded cash assistance. The time limit began in January 1997 and the first clients will reach this limit in January 2002.

Sample

In each of the first 15 months of welfare reform in the study state (October 1996-December 1997) a 5% random sample of exiting cases was drawn from the universe of cash assistance (TANF) case closings each month. Unlike some welfare leavers studies, the sample is not restricted to a particular type of case (e.g., those who were work-mandatory, those who left welfare for work, those who left voluntarily). The sample, therefore, represents the entire range of case situations, including cases that return to welfare after exiting. The definition of an "exit" is also broad; cases were eligible for selection into the sample as long as there was at least one calendar day between case closing (exit) and reopening (recidivism). Monthly sample sizes range from 194 to 197, totaling 2,665 families for the 15-month period.

Data Sources

The present study uses longitudinal data collected from various state administrative databases. Administrative data are the data of choice for conducting studies such as this because they permit larger samples to be studied and are not affected by response rate problems which have plagued most survey-based investigations of welfare leavers under TANF (Acs and Loprest, 2001; Cancian et al., 1999; Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2001). Compared to surveys, administrative data-based studies can usually also yield results more quickly and are easier and less expensive to maintain longitudinally.

Cases and individuals are profiled at time of exit from TANF (baseline) and at 3, 6, 12, 18 and 24 months post-exit, using administrative data systems maintained by various state agencies. Two systems (Automated Information Management System/Automated Master File–AIMS/AMF and Client Information System/Client Automated Resource and Eligibility System–CIS/CARES) contain case and individual-level data on public assistance and social service programs under the purview of the state's human resource agency, as well as demographic information about each recipient and assistance unit.

Another system (the Maryland Automated Benefits System–MABS) contains official data on employment and wages in industries covered by the state's Unemployment Insurance (UI) program. Approximately 93% of Maryland jobs are covered. Important omissions include military and civilian federal employees, among others. Accurate and complete information on client's post-exit employment is also limited by our lack of access to UI databases for the District of Columbia and the four states that border Maryland. Lack of cross-border employment data is common to many, if not all, welfare leavers studies at present.

Analysis

These data are used to examine several dimensions of recidivism in the time-limited world. First, overall recidivism rates at 3, 6, and 12 months post-exit are calculated. The timing of returns, specifically the extent to which "administrative churning" (cases which close, but reopen in 30 days or less) may be contributing to the observed recidivism rates, is then examined. Rates are calculated separately for sanctioned and non-sanctioned cases and, more generally, we examine whether recidivism appears to vary by case closing reason. Finally, because recidivism prevention is so important in the new time-limited welfare world, the characteristics of recidivists and non-recidivists are compared. Multi-nomial logistic regression analysis is used to identify significant predictors of recidivism. We examine variables which have historically predicted recidivism (see, for example, Blank and Ruggles, 1994; Cao, 1996; Ellwood, 1986; Greenberg, 1993; Harris, 1996; Pavetti, 1993; Weeks, 1991) including payee's age, payee's racial/ethnic background, region of residence, number of children, age of youngest child, length of exiting spell, total time on welfare during the five years preceding the exit (lifetime welfare use), pre-exit wage history, and whether the payee worked in the exit quarter and the quarter immediately after exiting welfare.[3]

RESULTS

How Many Families Return to Welfare After an Exit?

See Table 1 for a presentation of the "worst case" recidivism rates at the 3-, 6-, and 12-month follow-up points. These are "worst case" statistics largely because they do not take into account the phenomenon of "administrative churning," or returns which occur within the first 30 days. As will be shown, excluding churning cases from the analysis reduces the recidivism rates dramatically. However, even using the "worst case" approach to measuring recidivism, the vast majority of exiting families are able to remain off the welfare rolls; a full year post-exit, over two-thirds (68.7%) have not returned to cash assistance.

The data also show that, as was true under AFDC, returns to welfare, when they do occur, happen very quickly, usually within three months (90 days) of case closure. One in five (20.5%) exiting families have returned to welfare three months after exiting; by the end of 12 months, the rate only increases by an additional eleven percent, such that, at the end of one year the "worst case" cumulative recidivism rate stands at 31.3%.

Table 1 provides only one programmatically useful piece of information about recidivism in the new welfare era, but it is a very important finding: early returns (within the first three months of exit) constitute the bulk of the recidivism problem at the moment. Prior experience with old (AFDC) and new (TANF) welfare systems as well as findings from AFDC-based research studies suggest there are two phenomena most likely responsible for these early returns to welfare. One possibility is that sanctioned cases, those where the entire grant is terminated for non-compliance with work or child support requirements, are the ones returning to welfare shortly after exiting. The second is that "administrative churning," accounts for most of the early returns. This type of churning, a frequent occurrence under AFDC, could conceivably still be quite common under TANF. Table 2 shows which of these explanations is supported by the data.

In the first few months post-exit, the bulk of returns to welfare are accounted for by "churners." In contrast, sanctioned cases have only minimal impact on the overall recidivism rate in the first few months. This is not meant to imply that sanctioned cases have low rates of recidivism, for they do not; their recidivism rates are quite high. However, there are so few sanctioned cases that they have only minimal impact on the overall sample's recidivism rates. These realities are most dramatically illus-

TABLE 1. Recidivism Rates: Entire Sample at 3, 6 and 12 Months

Months Post-Exit	% Not Returning to TCA by this Time	% Returning to TCA by this Time	Cumulative Rate of Returns to Welfare
3 months	79.5%	20.5%	20.5%
6 months	75.0%	25.0%	25.0%
12 months	68.7%	31.3%	31.3%

TABLE 2. Recidivism Rates: The Role of Sanctioning and Churning

Types of Cases	3 Month Recidivism	6 Month Recidivism	12 Month Recidivism
All Cases	20.5% (545)	25.0% (665)	31.3% (835)
All Cases Except: Full Family Sanctions	19.2% (470)	23.5% (574)	29.9% (731)
All Cases Except: "Churners" (returned to TCA in 30 days or less)	7.5% (172)	12.7% (292)	20.2% (462)
All Cases Except: Sanctioned Cases & "Churners"	6.8% (143)	11.7% (247)	19.1% (404)

trated in the "3 month recidivism" column of the table. Including all cases, the "worst case" scenario, about one in five clients (20.5%) returns to welfare within 90 days; when all cases except sanctioned cases are examined, the rate drops only marginally (19.2%). However, when the sanctioned cases are included, but "churners" excluded, the three-month rate drops precipitously–to just over five percent (7.5%). A similar pattern, though not quite as dramatic, can be seen in the "6 month recidivism column." Here, the "all case/worst case" recidivism rate is 25.0% and excluding sanctioned cases has virtually no effect (23.5%). Excluding only the churning cases (those who return to welfare in 30 days or less), however, the six-month rate of return is more than cut in half (12.7%).

At the 12-month post-exit point, the pattern also prevails. Even at one year post-exit the vast majority of (non-churning) families have managed to remain off the welfare rolls. Including cases that were sanctioned, fewer than one in five (20.2%) have returned to cash assistance.

Does Recidivism Risk Vary by Case Closing Reason?

The preceding analyses focus primarily on the timing of returns to welfare, but also give rise to the possibility that, as was true under

AFDC, certain types of cases may be more at risk to experience a return to welfare than others. Such a finding would be important for front-line welfare practice because, to prevent recidivism, program managers and caseworkers need more specific information about who is returning to welfare and who is not. Thus, two other possibilities are examined. The first is that there may be a relationship between case closing reason and recidivism risk. To conduct this analysis we focus on the "top five" case closing reasons which, together, account for four of every five (80.9%) closures in our sample. Table 3 presents the results of this analysis.

The likelihood of returning to welfare within the first 90 days does vary depending on the administratively-recorded reason for closing the welfare case. Lowest rates of return are found among those who, as known to the agency, leave welfare for work ($\chi^2(12) = 156.8$, $p < .001$). Payees whose closing reasons were because their income was over the TANF limit or they started work (7.9%) have the lowest rates of early returns to welfare. The highest rate of early (within three months) recidivism occurs among those whose cases were closed for non-compliance with work requirements. One of every three such recipients (32.0%) had returned to welfare within three months. A closer look reveals that the large majority of work-sanctioned cases that came back within 90 days actually returned within the first 30 days. Specifically, 58 work-sanctioned cases came back to welfare within the first 90 days; of

TABLE 3. Three Month Recidivism Rates by Case Closing Reason

Administrative Case Closing Reason (Top Five)***	Did Not Return to TCA in Three Months		Returned Within 30 Days of Exit		Returned Between 31 and 90 Days After Exit		Total Returning to TCA in Three Months	
Income above limit/Started work	92.1%	(758)	2.9%	(24)	5.0%	(41)	7.9%	(65)
Did not reapply/ no redet.	72.1%	(403)	21.1%	(118)	6.8%	(38)	27.9%	(156)
Did not give eligibility info	77.8%	(288)	15.4%	(57)	6.7%	(25)	22.1%	(82)
Payee requested case closure	78.6%	(176)	17.4%	(39)	4.0%	(9)	21.4%	(48)
Full family sanction (work)	68.0%	(123)	18.8%	(34)	13.2%	(24)	32.0%	(58)

Notes: *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

this number, 58.6% (n = 34) had returned by the end of the first month. This last finding is consistent with arguments made by front-line staff for adoption of full family sanctioning as an effective way to "get the client's attention" and secure their participation in work before their time limits expired.

These analyses lead to the obvious question of whether the demographic characteristics of those who return to welfare shortly after an exit differ from the characteristics of those who do not return. Recidivism research under AFDC was generally consistent in showing that lack of work experience, among other things, increased a person's risk of recidivism. Because the new welfare systems are so radically different from AFDC, however, today's risk factors may or may not be the same. Thus, it is necessary to examine this issue using data generated under the new program rules.

Do Those Who Return Differ from Those Who Do Not Return?

To determine if today's recidivists and non-recidivists differ, we compare those who returned to Maryland's new cash assistance program with those who did not reenter based on 9 variables associated with AFDC recidivism. These variables are: payee age; payee racial/ethnic background; region of residence; number of children; age of youngest child; length of exiting spell; total number of months of receipt during the 5 years preceding the welfare preceding the exit; pre-exit wage history; and whether the payee worked in the exit quarter.

Tables 4 and 5 present the results of this multinomial logistic regression analysis at three months post-exit. The three month measure is used because, as demonstrated, the vast majority of recidivism under the new system has taken place in the first few months after cases close. In Table 4, the β coefficients and standard errors are displayed. For ease of interpretation, odds ratios are presented in Table 5. The model χ^2, a measure of model fit, indicates that the full model predicts the outcome significantly better than chance. Consistent with the earlier approach and findings, the tables present characteristics separately for recidivists who return to welfare in 30 days or less (the "churners") and those who return between the 31st and the 90th days (3 months), the true recidivists.[4]

Six variables significantly predict recidivism: age of youngest child in the assistance unit; ethnicity; city residence; number of children; lifetime welfare receipt; and employment in the quarter of welfare exit.

TABLE 4. Multinominal Logit Analysis: Coefficients and Standard Errors

Predictor	Churner vs.	Non-Recidivist	Recidivist vs.	Non-Recidivist	Churner vs.	Recidivist
Payee age at exit	2.002	(.008)	2.011	(.013)	.013	(.014)
Age of youngest child in assistance unit	2.009	(.018)	2.064*	(.028)	.073*	(.032)
Ethnicity (1 = minority)	.709***	(.145)	.399*	(.192)	.310	(.228)
City Residence (1 = Baltimore City)	21.631***	(.200)	2.989***	(.230)	2.642*	(.295)
Number of children	.123*	(.059)	2.109	(.090)	.232*	(.101)
Length of exit spell	2.003	(.003)	2.004	(.004)	.001	(.005)
Lifetime welfare receipt as an adult	.004	(.004)	.015**	(.005)	2.011	(.006)
Work history before TANF exit (1 = yes)	2.111	(.143)	2.278	(.197)	.167	(.227)
Working in the exit quarter (1 = yes)	2.751***	(.140)	2.161	(.186)	2.590**	(.219)
Intercept	23.702***	(.326)	22.802***	(.414)	2.900	(.501)
Model χ^2	202.144***					

Notes:
*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

TABLE 5. Multinominal Logit Analysis: Odds

Odds	Churner vs. Non-Recidivist	Recidivist vs. Non-Recidivist	Churner vs. Recidivist
Payee age at exit	1.002	0.989	1.013
Age of youngest child in assistance unit	1.009	0.937*	1.076
Ethnicity (1 = minority)	2.032***	1.490*	1.364
City residence (1 = Baltimore City)	0.196***	0.372	0.526*
Number of children	1.131*	0.896	1.261*
Length of exit spell	0.997	0.996	1.001
Lifetime welfare receipt as an adult	1.004	1.015**	0.989
Work history before TANF exit (1 = yes)	0.895***	0.758	1.182
Working in the exit quarter (1 = yes)	0.472***	0.851	0.555*

Notes:
*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Risk of returning to welfare is higher among minority exiters than Caucasian exiters. Somewhat surprisingly, residents of Baltimore City have lower odds of returning to cash assistance than their peers in Maryland's other 24 jurisdictions. Also, when they do return to TANF, Baltimore City residents are more likely to return after the 30th day, than in the first 30 days.

Former recipients with older children and those with shorter lifetime histories of welfare receipt experience lower risk of returning to welfare within 31 to 90 days; however, their risk of administrative churning is not significantly different than their peers. Higher risk of administrative churning is positively associated with the number of children in the assistance unit, such that larger assistance units are more likely to return to TANF in the first 30 days than smaller assistance units.

Results for the two employment predictors indicate that clients without a recent employment history and those who did not work in the quarter they left welfare experience higher risk of returning within the first 30 days. However, neither employment variable significantly predicts risk of true recidivism.

DISCUSSION

These data on returns to welfare among one state's early TANF leavers, those who exited during the first 15 months of welfare reform, offer reasons for cautious optimism, but also reason for some concern. They also have implications for front-line welfare administrators and for researchers.

Most generally, we have found that, even using a worst case approach to recidivism measurement, the large majority of early TANF leavers have been able to remain off welfare. Consistent with AFDC-based studies, those who return tend to so do very quickly, often within one month of exiting. Some clients do appear to be at greater risk of returning to welfare than others. Especially vulnerable are those on whom a full family sanction was imposed for non-compliance with work requirements, non-Caucasian clients, those with young children, and those with longer welfare histories.

Our finding that Baltimore City residents experience lower recidivism risk than residents of Maryland's smaller jurisdictions is encouraging, given that Baltimore City cases compose the majority of Maryland's TANF caseload. However, these results should be treated with caution as they are based on data from the earliest TANF leavers and may not be representative of patterns in the later years of reform. In fact, many authors have noted that those exiting TANF in the early months of reform may experience less difficulty in transitioning from welfare to work than those exiting more recently (Allen and Kirby, 2000; Born, Ovwigho, Leavitt, and Cordero, 2001; Brookings Institution, 1999; Brown, 1997; Heinrich, 1999; Katz and Allen, 2001; Loprest and Zedlewski, 1999). The fact that rates of TANF exits in Baltimore City were much lower than in the other jurisdictions during the first two years of reform may also help explain why Baltimore City residents had lower recidivism risk in the present analyses (Born, Ovwigho, and Cordero, 2000).

Our results showing that employment history and employment in the quarter of exit predicts churning, but not true recidivism are somewhat surprising. However, they may be indicative of the reality that "keeping a job" is a much greater challenge for welfare recipients than "getting a job." Indeed, the welfare research literature documents that most recipients have worked in the past, but for many the jobs ended and they had to return to cash assistance. Program managers interested in identifying and providing targeted support services to families at risk of recidivism may find that other factors, such as the type of job or amount of income it produces may be better indicators than simply if the person has a job.

Optimistically, data presented here suggest that recidivism under the new devolved cash assistance program, at least in the study state, has been less than, or certainly no worse than, what might have been expected had welfare continued in its pre-TANF form. Returns to welfare are, in fact, probably lower than in the pre-TANF era since today's estimates include very early returns (churnings) in recidivism rate calculations whereas prior studies have not.

One of the limitations of the present study is that it only examines data from one state. With the devolution of welfare programs from the federal government to the states, national level data are much more difficult to interpret. State-specific analyses such as the one presented here are necessary. Readers are cautioned not to assume that these findings are exactly representative of their state programs. They are encouraged, however, to consider the results reported here in the context of their specific program, community, and client base.

An additional limitation is the lack of data on several variables which may also be good predictors of recidivism risk. In particular, information about the type of employment a recipient obtains, their receipt of support services such as child care subsidies, Food Stamps, and Medical Assistance, and their perceptions of barriers to employment such as transportation or health difficulties would improve the predictive ability of the model tested here.

On a less sanguine note, the findings indicate that welfare agencies and their community partners face not one recidivism challenge in the new time-limited welfare world, but two. There is clear indication in our data that there really may be two distinct types of recidivism–that which happens in the first 30 days after exit and that which occurs later. These may be very distinct phenomena involving different types of clients and, quite likely, requiring different ameliorative strategies and techniques.

The existence of churning certainly is not news; its presence has been acknowledged, though to our knowledge never systematically examined, in virtually every recidivism study carried out during the pre-TANF era. This omission was understandable given the open-ended nature of the old AFDC program. However, it means that agency officials, as well as researchers, know very little about this phenomenon, including its true prevalence, the characteristics and circumstances of churning clients, and steps that might be taken to reduce its occurrence. A certain amount of churning is no doubt inevitable. Nonetheless, we suspect many policy-makers and program managers likely share our view that, should the trends observed in this study persist, the resources and time spent on closing and then almost immediately reopening large numbers of cash assistance cases could be put to much better use. The unquantified, but likely not insubstantial fiscal costs of churning will take on even greater importance, of course, if federal TANF funds are reduced as part of the program's reauthorization.

On the agency front-lines, our findings suggest that attention to case closing practices is probably the best place of beginning insofar as better understanding and mastery of the churning phenomenon is concerned. Until recently the role of welfare staff was to determine eligibility and issue benefits. Welfare reform increased caseworker's responsibilities, adding such tasks as client assessment, intensive case management, and job development. Some staff may also feel pressured to move families off the caseload as quickly as possible. One fruitful area of inquiry to understand why churning occurs and how it can be prevented would be an examination of staff duties, allocation and workload relative to client outcomes.

In addition to the costs to the welfare department, low-income families may also incur costs by cycling rapidly on and off the welfare rolls. Qualitative research among families receiving welfare has demonstrated that for many families the money runs out well before the month does (Lein and Edin, 1997). Administrative churning likely produces delays in cash benefit receipt–delays which fragile families can ill-afford. Moreover, the delay may result in their only receiving a partial grant for the month of return. However, even if the grant is small, it still counts as a month of receipt charged against their lifetime limit.

For the research community also, these preliminary findings suggest there is much work to be done, both empirically and conceptually. Recidivism obviously is alive and well in the new welfare environment and at least in the study state, has shown no signs of withering away. In the early years of TANF it appears that the lion's share of recidivism is of the type (churning) about which the field knows virtually nothing. This situation is unfortunate, to say the least, given the inflexibility of the federal 60 month time limit and the much shorter limits in some states. It is thus incumbent upon researchers, especially those working closely with state welfare agencies, to expand the current foci of the now numerous welfare leaver's studies to also examine leavers who return to welfare. In doing so, our preliminary findings suggest it would be most programmatically useful if conceptual consensus could also be reached that, because of time limits, "churning" as well as more classical recidivism is worthy of researcher's and administrator's attention. Indeed, there are hints in our data that one of the most important questions related to recidivism now is precisely to learn more about the churning phenomenon and population. For example, on some dimensions churners in our study resemble true recidivists; on others they more closely resemble non-recidivists.

There is also at least a tantalizing hint in our data that a history of churning may possibly indicate a case that, in today's vernacular, might be among the "hard to serve." Further studies examining such issues as whether churning is a one-time or repeat phenomenon for families and what happens to families who experience rapid cycling on- and off-welfare over time would provide useful programmatic information about transitions from welfare-to-work. For example, other researchers have argued that the welfare to work transition is a continuum, with families passing through a number of stages before finally exiting the welfare system permanently (Herr, Wagner, and Halpern, 1996). Churning may in fact be an early stage in this process.

In the best tradition of research, this preliminary analysis of returns to welfare in the post-TANF era in one state has clearly raised more questions than it has answered and posed more administrative and evaluation challenges than it has resolved. It also illustrates the global dilemma facing program managers and researchers in the post-TANF era; many of the old conundrums are with us still (who uses welfare? when? why? for how long?), but many issues not previously of prime importance, such as churning, also require our attention.

NOTES

1. Eight states have chosen to impose shorter lifetime limits: Arkansas (24 months); Connecticut (21 months); Florida (48 months); Georgia (48 months); Idaho (24 months); Montana (24 months); Ohio (36 months); and Utah (36 months). In some states, recipients have already reached the lifetime limit.

2. Recidivism is the common term used in the literature to refer to returning to welfare, after leaving for a period of time. Its use in this paper reflects this common terminology and is not meant to equate to returns to welfare with other activities often referred to as "recidivism" such as repeat criminal acts.

3. Factors outside the individual such as local economic conditions also influence recidivism risk. Sample sizes at the substate level do not permit us to examine these issues in this paper.

4. The comparisons were also run with churners and recidivists combined; the patterns of significance were the same.

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