

Why Crack the Whip on Welfare?

By Philip N. Cohen

Guest columnist

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Much has been made recently of the supposedly growing number of middle-class mothers who opt out of the labor force to spend more time raising their children. Given all the positive attention these women have received, you might think encouraging mothers to stay home with their children was a good thing. But when it comes to the poor in the era of permanent welfare reform, you would be wrong. That's why the Bush administration is implementing new regulations for the federal welfare program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, aimed at making sure more women on welfare are really "working" – and threatening to cut funding to states that don't crack the whip.

Welfare reform was considered a great success when millions of single mothers were pushed into the workforce. And the numbers were impressive. Each March, the government measures how many women who received welfare in the previous calendar year are now employed. That number more than doubled from a low of 18 percent in 1992 to peak at 38 percent by 2000.

Of course, that was thanks not only to welfare reform but also to the far-reaching economic expansion of the 1990s. Since then half of that gain has been lost: just 28 percent were employed in March 2005, the last year for which the data are available.

Maybe the middle-class choice to stay home is spreading to poor mothers, too. If so, the administration plans to do something about it, moving to increase enforcement of the requirement that states move half of their welfare recipients to work.

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But who are these women? We're down to less than 600,000 single mothers who got welfare in 2004 and were not employed in March 2005. Of those, 24 percent had disabilities, 41 percent hadn't finished high school and less than 3 percent had finished college, 65 percent had a child under the age of 6, and 66 percent were African American or Hispanic. Welfare recipients who don't have children are even worse off: a third were disabled and more than half didn't finish high school.

Welfare reform zealots want to drag poor mothers on welfare into the public square, mocking their use of state rules permitting "bed-rest" and reading "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" as a means to avoid real work. But anyone can see that the employment prospects of today's welfare recipients in the current economy are bleak at best.

Given the low wages these women would earn even if they did find suitable jobs, and the costs they would incur from child care and transportation, the notion that they're choosing not to work is something of a stretch.

All those parents who really are choosing to devote their time to raising children – and the many more who celebrate that sentiment – should consider supporting the women caught between the rock of welfare reform and the hard place of today's labor market.

The author is associate professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Cohen is misinformed

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A July 2 column on welfare reform by UNC's Philip N. Cohen ["Why Crack the Whip on Welfare?"] opposed the Bush Administration's new plan to help states engage more welfare recipients in work. As the federal official responsible for overseeing the next phase of welfare reform, I would like to respond.

Cohen focused on mothers receiving public assistance, saying we "should consider supporting the women caught between the rock of welfare reform and the hard place of today's labor market." Leaving aside the fact that today's unemployment rate of 4.6 percent hardly reflects a "hard place," the truth is that so long as a parent is on welfare, both she and her children will be poor.

The only way not to be poor is to have earnings sufficient to lift one's family out of poverty. The only way to do that is to leave welfare for work.

And that's what millions of formerly dependent welfare recipients have done. Indeed, since the enactment of welfare reform law of 1996, 1.4 million fewer children are living in poverty. Why? Because one or both of their parents went to work.

The reason why we are implementing the next phase of welfare reform is not to "crack a whip," but to help welfare dependent families achieve the dignity and self-sufficiency that comes through paid employment. The alternative is to consign them forever to poverty. Cohen may be content with that, but we are not.

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