

Racial Differences Among AFDC Recipients: Background Characteristics and Reasons for Needing AFDC

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Methodology

The Arkansas Welfare Waiver Demonstration Project, as conducted by the School of Social Work at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, focused its efforts primarily on evaluation of the waiver in ten counties in the State of Arkansas. The project ran from July 1, 1994 to June 30, 1997. The purpose of the project was to test the effectiveness of imposing benefit limits through a family cap on Aid To Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients and increased emphasis on family planning to affect childbearing outcomes.

The sample for this paper consisted of 992 adults who were invited to participate in several ways, including a letter sent from the local Department of Human Services county office, by telephone, upon intake, or re-certification. This paper is a descriptive analysis of the data sample, of which 97.7 percent of the respondents were black or white. The remainder of the sample who identified themselves as "other" were eliminated from subsequent analysis due to small N.

The evaluation team from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock collected data from November, 1994 through December, 1995. Those who responded to the letter comprised 49.5 percent; by phone 22.2 percent. Those applying for the first time or for re-certification constituted 4.9 and 23.4 percent, respectively. AFDC caseheads living in a home receiving benefits totaled 93.7 percent for whites and 97.2 for blacks of this adult sub-sample. The welfare recipients were randomly assigned to an experimental or control group, based on the last digit of their social security number.

The current findings are from a secondary analysis of the data and focuses on the racial differences among AFDC recipients in their background characteristics and their reasons for needing AFDC.

Measures

A series of related questions, commonly called scales, pertaining to locus of control, self-esteem, social support systems, and hopelessness, were used to elicit specific responses which combined create a summary profile for each casehead by theme. Four questions (e.g. *"What happens to me is my own doing."*) were asked from the Rotter internal-external locus of control scale (Collins, 1974). Response categories ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". This scale was used to identify the degree of control an individual may perceive they have over their own life

circumstances. People who see events that occur in life as influenced by their own actions, capacities, or traits are labeled with possessing internal control, while those who believe life events are influenced by conditions outside themselves are labeled as possessing external control (Hersch & Scheibe, 1967).

The self esteem scale included ten questions (e.g. *"I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others."*) which factored into two components reflecting positive or negative esteem.

The social support scale included fifteen questions (e.g. *"There is a special person around when I am in need."*) which factored into three components reflecting perceived support from close family relationships, from wider circles of friends, and from people who would offer monetary support. Each of the three new factored variables were then averaged together to find the client's mean score for the targeted theme. The questions all followed a Lickert response format with four choices ranging from strongly agree (1), agree (2), disagree (3), to strongly disagree (4), labeled as needed for a higher value to reflect relative degree or strength of response.

To understand whether our AFDC clients are optimists or pessimists, eight questions from the hopelessness scale were used (Marshall & Wortman, 1992). The tendency to have an optimistic outlook on life has been linked with psychological and physical well-being. The questions were true (1) or false (2) and were recoded as needed for a lower value to reflect increased hopefulness (e.g. *"I look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm"*.)

Results

40.8 percent of the respondents were white and 59.2 were black. The highest percentage of our sample receiving AFDC benefits was concentrated from age 18 to 29 for both races at 43.6 percent and 46.8 percent respectively, for whites and blacks. Though most of the respondents, white (85.2 percent) and black (88.0 percent) were not in school, the average number attending school was roughly the same among whites (14.8 percent) and blacks (12.0 percent). However those who had actually earned college degrees were the same for both white and black respondents. Differences were found between the 41.5 percent of the white respondents and 19.6 percent of the black respondents in terms of being married.

Black households had more people, more children, and had received AFDC benefits slightly longer in comparison to white households. White respondents moved more than black respondents, averaging about a move per year, while black respondents averaged a move every two years. Most of the respondents, both black and white, did not work. Of those who did work, white respondents reported working more on average than black respondents.

Additional analysis showed that more of the white respondents (30.7 percent) were better educated in terms of completing high school than black respondents (18.0 percent). The fathers of white respondents (34.0 percent) also had more high school, college, and technical training than the fathers of black respondents (21.6 percent). However it should be noted that more of the black respondents were not sure what level education their fathers had attained in comparison to white respondents.

As for reasons for needing AFDC benefits, the most frequently cited reason by white respondents was "health problems", followed by "one parent abandoned family". The most frequently cited reason for black respondents was "can't find a job" followed by "lack of education". Whites and

blacks showed little difference for needing AFDC because of "birth of child", "lack of education", and "lack of training". Black respondents cited three times as much job discrimination than white respondents. Black also cited "can't find a job" about twice as much as whites.

When asked how much receiving AFDC benefits due to the birth of a baby would influence their plans to have a baby, most of the respondents, both white (92.0 percent) and black (78.4 percent) said that potential AFDC benefits would not influence their decision whether or not to have a child. Though most of the respondents said that AFDC benefits were not sufficient incentive to bear children, a significant number felt otherwise; blacks about two to one over whites among respondents who felt that way. About a third of both white and black respondents reported that the birth of a child was a reason which contributed to their being on AFDC.

When asked if being on welfare made them unhappy, more than three-fourths of the white respondents reported that it did. About two-thirds of the black respondents felt the same way. About sixty percent of the white respondents said that they thought that the welfare system could get them off welfare. Three-fourths of the black respondents agreed with them. More white respondents than black respondents felt that the welfare system could not get them off welfare. A fourth of the respondents, white and black said that there was nothing that they could do to get off welfare.

When asked about each separate component of AFDC benefits they received, the majority, both white and black, identified no single item as enough incentive to be on welfare. But when taken as whole package of benefits, their responses changed. Of those who agreed that a job was not sufficient incentive to give up welfare benefits, over two-thirds were white, and over half were black. About a third both white and black, disagreed and said that a job was preferable to receiving welfare.

In terms of locus of control, it appears that black respondents feel outside forces affecting more than whites to a slight, but significant degree. The black respondents on the other hand, generally felt better about themselves than the white respondents, as indicated by mean scores on self-esteem. More white respondents than black respondents seemed to feel more support from their circle of friends. In terms of optimism white respondents also seemed somewhat more likely to feel that their status quo would improve than black respondents.

Conclusion

This analysis investigates the effects of race with a sample which is overwhelmingly female. The high numbers of female headed households gives strong argument to the "feminization of poverty" thesis. Results of this analysis suggest differences between blacks and whites in the background characteristics and reasons attributed to their being on welfare. The data seem to indicate that reform efforts would do well to be sensitive to cultural differences that may predispose people to poverty. Targeting education, job training, and family planning are reform efforts which would benefit both whites and blacks alike.

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