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The Initial Impacts of Welfare Reform on the Incomes of Single-Mother Families

Executive Summary

by Wendell Primus, Lynette Rawlings, Kathy Larin, and Kathryn Porter

Dramatic declines in recent years in the number of people receiving cash welfare benefits and food stamps have contributed to the conventional wisdom that the new welfare reforms are working very well. Caseload reduction by itself, however, is not an adequate measure of success. The ultimate criteria for measuring success also should include whether the well-being of children and families has improved. That could occur in a number of ways: through increased labor force participation and earnings of custodial parents, increased child support collections received by custodial parents, or an increase in the number of children who reside with both parents.

Several developments have enhanced the economic well-being of the nation's poorest families with children in recent years. Strong economic growth, unusually low unemployment

rates, continued expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and welfare policy changes have contributed to an increase in employment and earnings among poor families. At the same time, however, changes in low-income programs have led to sharp decreases in the number of families receiving means-tested cash and food assistance benefits and the income that such benefits provide.

Data that begin to shed light on the combined effect of these two divergent trends on the economic well-being of poor families with children are just becoming available. This study focuses on the effects of these two trends on single-mother families and their children. Nearly half of all single-mother families have incomes below the poverty line before the effects of government benefits are considered. Many more such families have incomes only modestly above the poverty line. This study uses Census data to compare income trends during a pair of consecutive two-year periods, 1993 to 1995 and 1995 to 1997, during both of which the economy continued to grow.

Despite economic growth, the average income of the poorest fifth of single-mother families fell from 1995 to 1997, with the primary factor causing the decline being a drop in means-tested benefits that substantially exceeded the decline in need.

Findings

The disposable incomes of single-mother families rose broadly and substantially between

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Nicole

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