

And Now, 'Welfare Reform' for Men

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Reforms in the 1990s shifted more than 60 percent of mothers off the welfare rolls, mostly into jobs. The changes used both "help and hassle" -- new subsidies for wages and child care coupled with stiffer demands to work as a condition of aid. So, how could we do the same for low-income men?

Low-income men, often the absent fathers of welfare families, got little attention from the reforms because they are seldom on welfare themselves. Like mothers on welfare, they seldom work regularly, and this helps to keep families poor. In 2005, there were more than 7 million poor men ages 16 to 50 in the United States, and only half of them worked at all. Among black men in poverty, nearly two-thirds were idle, and their employment has fallen steadily in recent decades.

Why are low-skilled men withdrawing from work just when unskilled jobs appear plentiful and immigrants are flooding into the country to take them? One reason might be that the wages these men could earn have fallen, so, the thinking goes, why work for chump change? Yet these men failed to work more even in the 1990s, when wages for low-skilled jobs rose. It's more likely that male work discipline has deteriorated. Poor men want to work and succeed, yet many cannot endure the slights and disappointments that work involves. That's why poor men usually can obtain jobs yet seldom keep them.

Employing larger numbers of low-income men isn't going to be easy. Congress is likely to raise the minimum wage, and wage subsidies for low-skilled men could also be increased. But if low wages are not the main cause of male nonwork, these steps will change little. In welfare reform, improving work incentives by itself had little effect. Coupling new benefits to definite demands to work is what drove welfare mothers to work and then rewarded them. The same is probably true here: Nonworking men deserve to earn more, but they also must be required to work, as they seldom are today. Formerly, they could have entered the Army, where they could be ordered to work, and military service does help some men get their lives together. Unfortunately, today's volunteer military is too selective to accept most disadvantaged applicants.

A better idea is to use the child support system, which requires absent fathers to support their families, and the criminal justice system, which is supposed to supervise many ex-offenders on parole after they leave prison. Right now these institutions depress male work levels by locking men up, and by garnishing their wages if they do work. But they could be used to promote work. For example, men in arrears on their child support could be assigned to work programs, as could parolees with employment problems. These men -- about 1.5 million each year -- would have to show up and work regularly -- on penalty of going to jail. Both groups might also receive wage subsidies. The combination might instill more regular work habits.

Mandatory work programs have not yet shown that they can raise work levels for men the way they did for women in welfare reform. However, past programs were not implemented well, and new experiments in prison reentry programs are being evaluated.

Mandatory work for 1.5 million men would cost \$2 billion to \$5 billion a year. In return, governments would collect more in child support and spend less on incarceration. Prison is hugely expensive -- in 2005, the average state cost per inmate was \$25,487. Prison work programs could more than fund themselves if they functioned well enough that more ex-offenders could be released early.

The nation needs work requirements not just for mothers on welfare but for nonworking men who owe debts to society. Like welfare reform, that policy might appear severe, but its aim is integration. Through steadier work, these men can come in from the cold.

The writer is a political science professor at New York University. This article summarizes a paper he wrote for a Brookings Institution project on antipoverty policy that will be published later this year in the journal **The Future of Children**.