

# **Welfare's Silent Citizenry: An Interview Based Study on Political Quiescence in New Jersey's Welfare System**

Evie Elson, Department of Politics, Class of 2019

---

## **Executive Summary**

This document is a call to action to conceive of ways that welfare policy can be reformed and shaped around the intersectional identities of welfare recipients so that they may be empowered to voice their demands within the welfare system and beyond. Experiences within the welfare system dampen recipients' willingness to both speak out against, and advocate for welfare. As a result, welfare recipients are not able to coalesce and take action in reforming the system that is currently flawed. Further, this form of political quiescence within the system extends to the larger context of the US political system, rendering this vulnerable population invisible in the eyes of the government. After interviewing individuals who have come into contact with the New Jersey welfare system (also known as WorkFirst New Jersey) either personally or through family/friends, I was able to understand the ways in which the interviewees perceive their own political efficacy both within the welfare system and within the US political system. By cross-examining the interview data with existing theories on political participation and marginalization of poor populations, I was able to draw themes and formulate the following hypotheses/main findings:

- 1) Welfare recipients' experiences within the welfare system condition them to relinquish their autonomy and assume a state of powerlessness and dependency on the government.**
  - 2) Welfare recipients internalized the negative public perception of welfare recipients to the extent that they dissociated from other recipients.**
  - 3) Welfare recipients perceived the system to be punitive and felt discouraged from making demands for fear of being sanctioned.**
  - 4) Welfare recipients relied upon personal networks to inform them about, or encourage them to engage in politics, and those who were more isolated did not politically engage as much.**
-

---

## Introduction

The US has not seen a social movement calling to reform welfare like that of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) that gathered organizers in throngs across the country to demand economic and social justice for welfare recipients in the 1960s and 70s. Therefore, I set out to understand why welfare recipients are no longer politically active in this way today, and what frameworks are preventing them from making political demands both within the welfare system and within their communities at large.

This report's use of the term "welfare system" refers to WorkFirst New Jersey (WFNJ), a program designed in 1997 after Bill Clinton enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) as part of his campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it." Under PROWRA, each state is responsible for administering their own welfare program using the block grant entitled Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). WFNJ therefore seeks to carry out TANF's objective to "end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage". TANF's policy objectives sought to mitigate the public's current concerns about the way that welfare served the needs of lazy individuals who did not want to work.

In order to qualify for enrollment in WFNJ, recipients must prove their income does not exceed the maximum benefit levels determined by the federal poverty level. In addition, they must agree to complete work requirements, which may be fulfilled either through a job they already have (on the condition it does not exceed the maximum the benefit level), or through job training, job searches, or volunteer work for a minimum of 35 hours each week. Failure to comply with these requirements results in sanctioning.

This report seeks to summarize some of the main findings from my thesis and in addition, provide some further analysis of those findings through an intersectional lens that will inform the policy recommendations outlined below.

## Findings

My research findings are based on interviews conducted with 15 participants in a county in New Jersey. I recruited these participants by contacting several organizations within the county whose clients were likely to have come into contact with the welfare system. The three sites included a homeless shelter, a social services provider, and a food pantry. I recorded these interviews I conducted over a span of two weeks, transcribed them, and then analyzed them

---

using a data analytics software. Using an interview guide, I asked participants about their experiences on welfare, when and how they voiced concerns within the system, and what forms of political engagement they participate in. Below, I report findings that are supported by anecdotal evidence that refers to each participant using the pseudonyms I assigned them.

**1) Welfare recipients' experiences within the welfare system condition them to relinquish their autonomy and assume a state of powerlessness and dependency on the government.**

Welfare recipients reported enrolling in WFNJ as a means of becoming independent from their families, but as they proceeded through the system, their self-determination transformed into dependency on government and lack of agency. The cycle of dependency on government was exacerbated by the fact that eligibility for enrollment required applicants to be on their last legs. Interviewees reported being turned away for reasons such as their income bracket was too high, or they had unemployment benefits left to claim, and were made to wait until they had exhausted all other options before being approved. During that interim period, some had become homeless. Those who had jobs upon enrollment were not exempt from the work requirements, despite WFNJ's assertion that work requirements may be fulfilled through employment, and eventually had to quit their jobs in order to avoid sanctioning for being absent from the training programs.

---

*"I had to give it up, to give up the job, and I was so heartbroken because I like working...Yeah. I was a forklift driver...So I had to just stop completely everything and give them...me. I guess that's what they wanted. They wanted all my attention, my, all my time." - Dalia*

---

Interviewees reported struggling to comply with the requirements in addition to stabilizing their life beyond welfare, for example, finding permanent housing, and caring for their children. The onerous demands of recipients therefore acted as a barrier to gaining independence, entrenching recipients in strict routines that left them with little flexibility and agency over their lives.

**2) Welfare recipients internalized the negative public perception of welfare recipients to the extent that they dissociated from other recipients.**

Evidently, interviewees were not immune to the pervasive public narrative that stigmatizes welfare recipients as lazy and undeserving of government aid. Interviewees often distanced themselves from this narrative by emphasizing their personal attributes that conflicted with the

---

narrative, and in the process dissociated from fellow recipients. Interviewees would accuse other recipients of gaming the system or having a bad work ethic.

---

*I know people abuse the system, but for someone who's never used it and desperately needs it, they make you have to work for it...But, you know, for the amount of people that seem to get it, um, they sure made it difficult for somebody who's paid taxes for the majority of his life. And, you know I'm standing in line with people who I know probably milk the system and they have \$500 strollers and \$500 iPhones in their hand (Eric, December 2018).*

---

Recipients employed the same forms of marginalization and stereotyping that they reported experiencing themselves. As a result, their willingness to advocate on behalf of welfare recipients was mitigated.

Furthermore, recipients' negative experiences within the system forced them to treat welfare as a temporary experience, and therefore one not worth fighting for. While they recognized that this was intentional – that the welfare system was intended to be uncomfortable so that individuals would not become dependent – this also deterred them from advocating for welfare since they knew they would not eventually benefit from the program. Their willingness to speak out on behalf of welfare therefore was contingent on the fact that they were currently benefitting from the system.

---

*“I would. Yeah I would, I would go out there and march with signs and sign a petition. I really would because I do believe in that. Because, right now, that's my source of income for me and my kids. So I'm going to support that.” - Lauryn*

---

### **3) Welfare recipients perceived the system to be punitive and felt discouraged from making demands for fear of being sanctioned.**

The strict sanctions, rules and regulations within the system made interviewees feel encroached upon and easily punished. This discouraged them from organizing with each other to voice their concerns. The ubiquity of benefit cuts due to non-compliance with welfare requirements prompted interviewees to refrain from speaking out for fear of losing their benefits.

---

*“Because, you know, I'm scared that I'm not going to be able to live. Or not be able to come back to an agency for help. It's more so of fearing for your kids and making sure that if anything does happen, you're not penalized.” - Dalia*

---

Recipients reluctance to speak out and to speak to one another about their common frustrations resulted in their suffering in silence. Moreover, even when they did voice concerns to community organization staff or their caseworker, recipients would feel misunderstood or ignored.

**4) Welfare recipients relied upon personal networks to inform them about, or encourage them to engage in politics, and those who were more isolated did not politically engage as much.**

My thesis reveals the ways in which recipient’s perceptions of their political efficacy within the welfare system translated to the larger context of US government. Interviewees’ reports of frustrations with the welfare system translated to their frustrations with the political system more generally. Feeling like their voices did not matter, that politics was geared towards the wealthy, and that they had little understanding of how the political system worked, all contributed to recipients lack of ability to speak up both within the welfare system, and within the electorate.

However, it became clear that these feelings of incapability of grasping politics or engaging in the system were largely mitigated by community members who encouraged recipients to become politically active. Friends and family, and community groups such as churches, provided interviewees with personal contacts that mobilized them to become politically engaged, whether it was to vote, to sign a petition, or to do volunteer work.

---

*“The way that they [the church] give support is different because it can encourage you and motivate you rather than just like having the knowledge—this is what you need to do, these are the people that you need to see. You know what I mean?” - Gabe*

---

In some cases, the sites at which they received assistance provided this network of engagement. Interviewees reported that at welfare agencies they were asked if they were registered to vote upon enrollment, and that their housing facilities provided information about candidates and

---

opportunities to vote. However, these forms of political mobilization were not as effective as personal interactions.

## **Implications**

The findings from my thesis have important consequences on the way recipients advocate for, or stand up against the welfare system. My thesis sought to center the experiences of welfare recipients in order to allow the stories of my interviews to be the focal point of analysis. Through this qualitative process, I was able to shed light on the ways in which the welfare system, and the institutions and community organizations with which recipients participate, fail to foster a sense of positive reinforcement and engagement that will politically empower recipients. This has important implications for the way that welfare recipients who are already part of a vulnerable and marginalized population in society become further entrenched in a position of powerlessness.

The issues that interviewees faced within the welfare system stemmed largely from the fact that as a populations of poor, and mostly black individuals, they are an especially disadvantaged group, and therefore have specific experiences that stem from multiple intersecting systems of oppression related to class, gender, and race. In order to understand how welfare recipients are disadvantaged, we can apply an intersectional lens that can help to center the experiences of welfare recipients in a way that welfare policy currently does not. As a result, the community organizations that engage with welfare recipients may provide more effective services for their clients and act as a better intermediary between their clients and welfare agencies.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **1) Revise welfare policy objectives to reflect the real experiences of target populations**

Included in the TANF objectives under PRWORA, is to “prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies” and “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.” These objectives not only force low-income families to conform to dominant societal norms such as two-parent families but they also perpetuate the narrative that welfare recipients are socially deviant and sexually promiscuous. The policy largely ignores the realities of living in poverty and fails to consider the overlapping forms of oppression that low-income

---

communities, who are also more likely to be communities of color, may face. For example, the high rates of incarceration in communities of color make it more difficult to form two-parent families. As a result, the TANF objectives marginalize families of color by labelling them as deviant to this prescribed norm.

This policy must be revised to reflect the real experiences of poverty-stricken communities and address the intersectional issues that low-income families face, instead of perpetuating stereotypes and imposing unrealistic norms.

### **2) Reform the “welfare-to work” strategy to prevent leading recipients to accept low-wage employment in an exploitative job market**

With their strict sanctioning and attendance policies, work requirements function as a mechanism of control over welfare recipients. While the work requirement, on its face, is supposed to provide recipients opportunities to find jobs that will enable them to become self-sufficient, instead it forces them into a labor market of jobs with wages too low for them to sustain themselves. Interviewees reported their difficulty finding jobs that paid well enough or lasted long enough to stay on their feet.

Work requirements perpetuate a cycle of marginalization and exploitation by coercing recipients to accept the first job they are offered. As a result, individuals accept volatile and low-paying jobs that are a reality for many poor Americans. If the intention of work requirements is to help needy families become self-sufficient, they should be revised to ensure proper protection and preparation for clients. For example, WorkFirst programs could form partnerships with employers in the communities who would offer recipients stable jobs, or provide recipients with useful vocational training for better paying jobs.

### **3) Improve the caseworker-client relationship**

For welfare agencies and community organizations that work with welfare recipients to be empowering for their clients, it is important for caseworkers and staff members to understand and listen to recipients. Interviewees talked about the neglect, judgment, or misunderstanding they experienced with their caseworkers, and as a result, recipients didn't voice their concerns and remained silent in moments of difficulty or frustration.

Therefore, staff members must recognize the intersecting burdens that their clients face in order to meet their needs and ensure they feel heard. This could be done with better training for staff to improve their cultural competency when dealing with clients. This could also be improved by

---

valuing staff with whom clients can relate, who have had similar experiences to them, or whose identities are more closely related.

#### **4) Revise the eligibility criteria for enrolling in welfare**

Interviewees described the process of enrolling in welfare and found that their approval depended on their being completely destitute. The fact that TANF requires applicants be at such levels of destitution further entrenches recipients into cycles of poverty. Instead, welfare should be reconsidered as a safety net that helps recipients *before* they have reached such levels. By refusing to give aid until one has exhausted all other options, the welfare system forces people to become entirely dependent on government aid once enrolled.

I propose that eligibility criteria should be formed using an intersectional lens to consider the unique experiences of low-income people, and especially low-income people of color. These vulnerable populations may be impacted by intersecting forms of oppression such as domestic violence, discrimination in the housing system, or lack of access to decent paying jobs, all of which may have contributed to their need for welfare. Therefore, welfare programs must come to terms with the ways in which low-income and minority people are multiply oppressed so as to provide services that empower them, rather than contribute to their oppression and silence.

#### **5) Form research groups that center welfare recipients as stakeholders**

Finally, and most importantly, this brief calls for a revival of the momentum that the NWRO produced in the 1960s and 70s. The information that my thesis collected is a starting point to centering the voices of these vulnerable populations so that their stories and experiences can become focal points for welfare policy going forward.

In a similar fashion to Queers for Economic Justice's existing research collaborative with low-income people, *Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative*, I recommend the creation of a similar research group that allows welfare recipients to be the "co-researchers" who can develop ideas to shape and reform welfare policy agendas going forward. This group could work in collaboration with sites such as the ones at which I interviewed, so that community organization that assist welfare recipients could become a part of the initiative.

I propose that this research group focuses on ways to empower welfare recipients politically so that they may find their political voice and be able to effectively organize to challenge, and not only resist, institutional frameworks that are currently keeping them voiceless.



---

## References

- Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady. *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Cohen, Cathy J. "Social Capital, Intervening Institutions, and Political Power." In *Social Capital and Poor Communities*, edited by Susan Saegert, J. Phillip Thompson, and Mark R. Warren, 267-89. Russell Sage Foundation, 2001.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610444828.17>.
- . *The Boundaries of Blackness*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color", 1991.
- Nadasen, Premilla. "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights," 2002.
- Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-193, § 101-116, 42 USC 1305 (1996). [https://congressional-proquest-com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/legisinsight?id=PL104-193&type=LEG\\_HIST](https://congressional-proquest-com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/legisinsight?id=PL104-193&type=LEG_HIST).
- Queers for Economic Justice. "A Fabulous Attitude: Low-Income LGBTGNC People Surviving & Thriving With Love, Shelter & Knowledge," 2010.
- Ridzi, Frank. *Selling Welfare Reform : Work-First and the New Common Sense of Employment*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Strolovitch, Dara Z. *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Young, Iris M. "Five Faces of Oppression." From *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 1990.