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I've always worked. I worked all my life. I've worked for the Attorney General, the Manhattan Borough President's office, and now I work for the Census. I have a Bachelor's Degree. They [Social Services] want you to stop school. When they sent me to welfare, I made an appointment, you know, I kept it. So I bring my resume and everything. He (the caseworker) never once looked at my resume. He told me, "You're going to the parks." I said, "Excuse me, I'm standing up here in a suit, and you're telling me I'm going to the parks?" This is dead in the wintertime. He said, "You heard me, you're going to the parks." I said, "I don't think so. Why can't I be in an office or something?" He said, "No you're going to be out there with the rest of them ... -- He was so nasty. You can have your resume, skills, and everything ... then they're going to put me to work in the parks or else cut off my benefits. They closed my case.

—Lorraine,2 4 June 2002

Lorraine, an African American woman in her late forties, lives in Central Harlem with her asthmatic teen-age son Michael. She not only has a work history, but also has a college degree. Lorraine's story exemplifies some reasons to reconsider the problems of welfare reform and the new work mandate. Her situation calls into question the roasting applause offered by policy pundits since changes in federal welfare rules were instituted seven years ago. Although the accolades reflect the interests of political elites who celebrate decreased enrollment in public benefits programs, for many people welfare reform is not the panacea it has been touted to be. This is especially true for many men and women of color who, along with advocates, vehemently argue that discrimination, poor access to education, and inadequate or inappropriate job training have made life under welfare reform harder for the poorest Americans. They also argue that its implementation is cruel because those in need must surmount tremendous barriers to access support.3

Life under welfare reform is not only harder than life pre-reform, but it can also be humiliating. People are forced to comply with work requirements that are often detri-
mental to the maintenance of their families and educational goals and do not capitalize on their prior work experience. As a result of welfare reform, a larger workforce has been generated, one that gluts the labor market, making it easier for employers to drop wages. Indeed, although the underlying assumption behind welfare reform is that poor people are lazy, in fact most people who receive benefits have worked in the past, but many find themselves unemployed, underemployed, or employed in jobs with wages so low they cannot survive. And because social service benefits are so meager, many recipients often supplement their income by working in the informal economy. Welfare reform discourages attainment of higher education and often steers people to inappropriate work assignments (as was the case with Lorraine). Rather than support people in developing and achieving long-term goals, welfare reform offers inadequate training that does not lead to permanent employment and a living wage. In fact, it often engenders antagonistic relations between government agencies and poor, working-class people.

This article describes experiences of welfare reform in New York City, specifically in Manhattan, and examines the effects of one aspect of this policy: work mandate and training programs. Through the voices of Black and Latino men and women who are low-income and reside in several Manhattan neighborhoods, we learn that those whose lives are directly impacted by the changes in welfare legislation must confront new economic barriers face-to-face. Many programs do not prepare them to be engaged in the formal labor market. The men and women whose stories illustrate the effects of welfare reform are perched on a precarious economic ledge as the new welfare system compromises their life chances and personal choices.

Welfare Reform: An Overview

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (hereinafter PRWORA or the Act), legislating changes that reflected “a politics of disgust” that punishes the poor. The Act eliminated welfare assistance as a federal entitlement for all eligible families. Under PRWORA, welfare assistance is now a block grant program through which states receive a fixed amount of federal monies regardless of the number of people in need. Not surprisingly, this drives states to devise mechanisms to decrease their caseloads.

Title I of the PRWORA, known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), replaced the AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children) program for women and children that had existed in various forms since the 1930s. The Act also replaced Home Relief, a program for childless single adults, Jobs Opportunities and Basic Skill Training Program (JOBS), and emergency assistance. The shift from entitlement to a block grant shredded much of the safety net, which had historically protected those most vulnerable against the vagaries and fluctuations of a market economy.

One of the most restrictive components of PRWORA is that it mandates that individuals may receive no more than five years of federal aid. Within these parameters, states may opt for a limit of less than five years or continue benefits after five years using state
funds, but most do not. For example, despite the fact that 8 percent of the population live in poverty in the state of Connecticut, recipients may only receive TANF benefits for a lifetime limit of twenty-one months—even if they have dependent children.\footnote{A second aspect of the new program, which has received much criticism, is the requirement that recipients meet increasing work participation rates and that all able-bodied welfare recipients work full-time after two years of receiving aid or risk losing their benefits. These two elements resulted in significant declines in the number of people receiving assistance. Between 1994 and 2001, there has been a national decline in the welfare rolls from 5.1 million to 2.9 million, as noted by Douglas J. Besharov, the Joseph J. and Violet Jacobs Scholar in social welfare studies at the American Enterprise Institute and a professor at the University of Maryland. Although conservative and neo-liberal politicians continue to praise reforms for decreasing the number of people on welfare, when viewed through the lens of race, a different assessment clarifies the impact of welfare reform policy. Recent research such as that conducted by the New York State Scholar Practitioner Team\footnote{Race-based discrimination has long contributed to perpetual poverty, and welfare reform policy accentuates the racial imbalance of those who constitute the poor. For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2001, the poverty rate among Blacks was 22.7 percent and among Hispanics, 21.4 percent—more than double the rate for whites, of whom 9.9 percent were poor. (Among Asian Pacific Islanders, the rate was 10.2 percent.) When seen in relation to the economic downturn and increasing unemployment rates in the United States, questions about the disparate impact of welfare reform on people of color and how they are faring must be raised.} has pointed to the disproportionate impact of welfare reform policy on communities of color.\footnote{In New York state, welfare reform began when Governor George Pataki signed the Welfare Reform Act of 1997. Political scientist and Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of the State University of New York, Brockport, Sarah F. Liebschutz, notes that the act had a twofold message: The message to recipients of public assistance was that they should work, not rely on welfare; to bureaucrats, the message was to emphasize workforce participation rather than welfare eligibility. The bureaucratic emphasis was hardly new. As early as 1988, former Governor Mario Cuomo had promoted training and employment programs for public assistance recipients. In the early 1990s, he stressed the use of supportive programs to encourage persons receiving Home Relief to work through “job search, work experience or other assigned activities.” By 1994, Cuomo expanded the work-first policy beyond those receiving public assistance through Home Relief. The policy, which came to be known as the JobsFIRST initiative, preceded the New York Welfare Reform Act of 1997. But, unlike the Welfare Reform Act, people were not penalized if they did not work and they were able to attend school and obtain job training. Meanwhile, downstate in New York City, Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was restructuring welfare. Giuliani had won the mayoral race just one year before Cuomo expanded the categories of JobsFIRST recipients. Although their approaches to increasing the rate of employment among recipients differed, Cuomo and Giuliani shared the}
goal of moving people off welfare. Indeed, increasingly, Democrats and Republicans nationwide shared this similar perspective regarding welfare policy: They viewed poor people as defective and seemed to believe that a job—any job—would automatically end poverty.

Giuliani’s work-first approach was considered by welfare advocates as extraordinarily mean-spirited because it forced participants to search for work full time though many had inadequate training to secure employment. In addition, the focus on work precluded meaningful educational attainment. A number of programs were developed to ensure attachment to work or work-related activities. The idea was that, if people were employed in private sector jobs, they would no longer need welfare. Or at the very least, their need for public assistance would decrease as wages garnered in the formal labor market increased. In reality, however, participation in programs that placed people in the formal labor market did not offset the costs associated with work, such as having to pay for childcare, purchasing clothes, and increased transportation costs. Additionally, the jobs secured were often temporary. Nonetheless, benefits were reduced or terminated even though employment and income were tenuous.

**Workfare in New York City**

In 1993, when Giuliani became mayor, New York City had more than 1.1 million public assistance recipients, making it the second-largest welfare system in the nation after California. His disdain for those on welfare was evident in a speech he gave when he took office: Something had to be done about the one-sixth of New Yorkers dependent upon the government, he said, and he promised to “end welfare by the end of the century.”

According to the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA), beginning in 1995 Giuliani led New York on a path to redesign its welfare policy. The model used to facilitate the change was called New York WAY (Work Accountability You). The program’s stated purpose was to encourage self-reliance and accountability, and the first step involved shifting the discourse about public assistance. No longer would a recipient go to a Welfare Center to apply for or receive benefits. By January 1998, the mayor announced that Welfare Centers would be re-named *Job Centers*. To expedite moving from welfare to work, applicants and recipients would access job search and placement services, childcare information, and educational and training service information immediately at each Job Center. Theoretically, they would be assisted in exploring and pursuing working alternatives to welfare. The name change, however, resulted in confusion for many people. In its newsletter, *Welfare News*, the Welfare Law Center stated that Job Centers were refocused in such a way that the fact that they provided public benefits was concealed. In other words, some members of the public were no longer certain they could apply for or receive benefits at Job Centers. In fact, it was discovered that some Job Center staff routinely misled prospective applicants, denied them the right to apply for benefits during the first visit, pressured them into withdrawing applications, improperly denied Food Stamps and Medicaid when
cash aid was denied, and failed to provide notice of the right to a fair hearing. Fair hearings are a process for challenging a determination of benefit denial, sanctions, or reinstatement of benefits. This diversionary strategy turned out to be successful, as many people missed their appointments and were dropped from the welfare rolls. But the tactics resulted in a lawsuit against Giuliani.15

The second step of the redesigned welfare system was the expansion of the workfare program, through which recipients would work off their monthly public assistance checks. This program was called the Work Experience Program (WEP). The administrative foot soldier who actualized Giuliani’s vision was Jason Turner, HRA Commissioner, whose office was responsible for the programmatic operation and compliance of social services. Turner, who was appointed in February 1998, won the position at least in part because he had reduced the number of public assistance recipients in Wisconsin. In New York City, Turner chipped away at the number of recipients receiving public assistance, and, over two years, city Human Resources Administration data showed that the number of single adults and those with dependents dropped more than 47 percent between 1998 and 2003. In February 1998, there were 791,884 recipients, and by February 2003, there were 418,700.16

Several core programs were designed to ensure rapid attachment to work. Those who did not find employment in the private job market and who opted to receive assistance were expected to participate in WEP, the rubric under which several programs are organized. Through WEP, each participant engages in structured work assignments and activities typically with government and not-for-profit agencies throughout New York City. These assignments are centered on the belief that people receiving public assistance do not value work and require training on how to follow directions and work cooperatively. Successful internalization of these objectives is supposed to lead to permanent employment in the private sector.

The Skills Assessment and Placement Program (SAP) is a four- to six-week program geared to new applicants for assistance—people not yet receiving benefits. Most Job Centers subcontract with one of four vendors who conduct assessments and place potential recipients in programs.17 Vendors place case managers in the Job Centers to work with potential recipients when they first apply for public assistance to evaluate their so-called job readiness.

The Employment and Services Placement Program (ESP) is for those whose benefits have been recently activated. Recipients are placed in ESP for employment and job placement. Some ESP clients may be Family Assistance, Safety Net Assistance, or non-public assistance recipients (i.e., food stamp recipients or those who are low-income). Through ESP, job-related training and self-development workshops are incorporated into the job search effort for up to six months. Similarly to SAP, ESP services are subcontracted out to eleven vendors including the four that have SAP contracts. These contracts are performance-based, with payment linked to the number of clients placed in jobs, the level of work (e.g., full-time or part-time) a person secures, job retention, and case closures. The more successful subcontractors are in assisting individuals to leave and remain off public assistance altogether, the more money they receive.19

To meet the job-related needs of special populations, there are additional programs. One is the Begin Employment Gain Independence Now (BEGIN) Managed Programs. Through BEGIN, those with low basic education skills are targeted for assistance in accessing work assignments and training. For example, there are Adult Education, GED, and ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. Other programs include the Career and Services Training (CAST) program, which provides internships for high school graduates. Pregnant women—except those with high-risk pregnancies—are directed to the Perfect Opportunity for Individual Skills Development (POISED) program. Involvement
in the POISED program is suspended from the eighth month of pregnancy until thirteen weeks after delivery, but after the newborn is thirteen weeks old, the mother resumes her work or work-related activities. There are also programs for those with medical limitations and substance abuse issues.

The Welfare to Work Program is a special WEP and Job Search program run by non-profit organizations that targets participants who have been on public assistance for two-and-a-half years or more, are ex-offenders, have a history of substance abuse, or have a history of mental or physical impairment. Those on welfare must take a job, any job, regardless of interest, skill level, type of job, or whether the job will lift the person out of poverty. As such, job placements and training are frequently menial. This was clear to the approximately forty thousand who were participating in workfare by August 1998, many of whom equated workfare with slavery. Journalist and Columbia University journalism professor LynNell Hancock learned that, although some assignments were administrative, many people were forced to work picking up garbage in the parks, cleaning municipal buildings, and doing track work for the City’s transit system. If they did not comply, recipients risked being sanctioned, including having benefits denied, or having their cases closed. The WEP assignments are not jobs, per se, since workers have neither benefits nor job protection. In spite of such pernicious exploitation, the HRA noted that New York City’s WEP program was a tremendous benefit to the city because of the low associated labor costs. WEP workers receive approximately $1.80 per hour, representing the city’s share of the welfare check. Community Voices Heard, an activist group composed mostly of women either on or formerly on welfare, has argued that New York City’s WEP uses welfare workers to do the same work as city workers, but the city pays them significantly less and undermines the employability of unionized workers.

What concerns do people have about WEP, training, and their own employability? How are these policies contextualized by race?
Gathering Voices: Methodology

The New York State Scholar Practitioner Team conducted a two-year study that explored the impact of welfare reform on two New York City communities, Harlem and the Lower East Side. Data for the study were collected using several methods: focus groups, in-depth interviews, surveys, and Photo Voice. The team conducted six focus groups, with a total of thirty-three participants, between June and November 2001, in collaboration with four community-based organizations and programs designed to capture the range of experiences East and Central Harlem and Lower East Side residents had with welfare reform. Focus group members attended voluntarily, receiving $20 for their participation. The focus group interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to raise concerns they felt were most pertinent. During the focus groups, participants were asked if they were interested in a one-on-one interview for an additional $20. Those who agreed participated in interviews, which lasted one to two hours, that provided an opportunity for deeper discussion about experiences with and the effects of welfare reform.

Surveys were administered to two hundred individuals between October and December 2001 to capture a statistical picture of community residents’ experiences under welfare reform. The team of surveyors approached individuals as they exited the eight HRA Job Centers in Manhattan. Though the survey results represent a non-random sample of individuals applying for or receiving public assistance in New York, the findings echo those of other studies exploring the effects of welfare reform, particularly studies focusing on people of color.

Photo Voice allows people to capture the issues they feel are important in confronting their environment. Community residents and the staff of community-based programs were given still cameras and asked to photograph their communities and provide a narrative explaining how the images were representative of the impact of welfare reform. This approach enabled participants to record and reflect on their community’s strengths and concerns. It also promoted critical dialogue and knowledge concerning personal and community issues through large- and small-group discussion of the photographs. The images on pages 30 and 34 are from the Photo Voice project.

Working It Off: Work Experience Programs and Training

As a result of welfare reform, any individual receiving public assistance in New York City is expected to work it off, typically through participation in a WEP program, which is structured to simulate a 35-hour work week. Generally, a person spends three days at work or at a WEP assignment and two days in an HRA authorized activity such as job search, GED preparation, basic education, or job training. In New York City, single parents must work twenty hours a week or be engaged in work-related activities, and adults in a two-parent family must work thirty hours per week. If people receiving assistance refuse to work or are unable to complete their assignments, they can be sanctioned—have their benefits terminated for a certain period of time or be cut off from receiving benefits altogether. Those working off a public assistance grant receive substantially less than a subsistence/minimum wage.

New York City’s program is viewed as particularly restrictive by many, but is also held up by some as a shining example of all that is right with welfare reform and the work-first approach. In fact, the Los Angeles Times reported that President George W. Bush has been so impressed with New York City’s workfare program that he wants it to become the national model. The president’s admiration may be related to the precipitous drop in the
number of welfare recipients despite the nation's economic downturn. And, although the national unemployment rate had, by August 2002, increased by more than 20 percent in the previous six months, the rolls continued to drop.32

Exaggerated Presumptions

During Giuliani's administration, Jason Turner often stated, "The best preparation for work is working."33 The subtext of his comment is based on the presumption that people who receive welfare do not want to work, have never worked, or do not have the skills to work. People receiving assistance, however, do have a desire to work. Furthermore, they often had previous work experience. In fact, although less than 10 percent of survey respondents reported being employed at the time the survey was administered, 60.3 percent had been employed in the last five years. Having previous work histories should increase employability—assuming jobs are available. So why weren't people working in the formal wage labor sector? Many assume that they failed to embrace the work ethic. But were there a sufficient number of jobs available? What obstacles limited employment options?

Among the reasons given for unemployment, inability to find a job was the most frequently cited. Nearly 40 percent of survey respondents stated this was the reason for not working. Sheena is a case in point. A mother of one, Sheena lost her job five months before being interviewed for the survey in November 2001, and she had been unable to secure another job. In another instance, Linda, who was twenty-one years old, said she "could not find a job," but was willing to take "any job because [she didn't] want to live a life of boosting [stealing]." Finally, Hosea, who has twenty-two years work experience, had been unemployed since March 2000. Yet, without formal employment, people had to find ways to make ends meet. According to the survey, 30 percent of all respondents did other work to survive, from braiding hair to babysitting to selling prepared food on the street.

Although assigned to a training program, Ivy said, "I haven't seen a computer room, not a training place. I haven't seen them really teaching us anything to benefit us"

These stories, which support analyses by other researchers,34 contradict the images of opportunistic so-called welfare mothers and shiftless free-loaders—harmful stereotypes used to demonize poor and working-class people and manipulate the public into supporting legislation that further limits the possibility of true poverty reduction. The larger context of unemployment rates provides a lens through which individual cases can be understood. Although the rates are unreliable because they only include people who are actively looking for a job and exclude those who have stopped their job search, they can show that unemployment is not an aberration. The data confirm that securing employment is often extremely difficult. According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics,35 between March 2000 and March 2001, when Hosea was jobless, the unemployment rate for the New York metropolitan area fluctuated between 4.7 percent and 5.8 percent. In March 2001, the rate was 5.2 percent, but a year later it was 7.1 percent. Unemployment
rates in New York continued to rise, and as of January 2003, it was 8.3 percent, significantly higher than the national rate of 6.5 percent. Clearly, people lost jobs or were unable to secure employment, substantiating the claims made by research participants that unemployment was the result of an inability to find work.

Thirty-six percent of survey respondents and focus group members cited the presence of health conditions that prevented them from working. Carlos, an eighteen-year-old Puerto Rican man, suffered from chronic asthma and was injured, forcing him to depend on a cane and preventing him from securing employment. Rather than assist Carlos in securing appropriate rehabilitative training or educational activities that would allow him to engage in meaningful activities given his physical limitations, his caseworker continuously placed him in WEP assignments to work off the $368 in cash and $25 in food stamps he received each month. Rarely were the assignments desk jobs, and they usually involved some sort of physical exertion. Carlos’s health condition limited his ability to work or participate in many work assignments. His health-related barrier to employment is a common reason for not working, reflecting findings in other studies. A recent study by Jamie Harris, a research analyst with the Alliance for Children and Families, and Thomas E. Lengyel, director of the Department of Research and Evaluation Services at the Alliance for Children and Families, found that one-third of the 106 participants in their study had a health condition that prevented them from working. The federal government’s own research identified health issues as a tremendous barrier to employment, reporting that 44 percent of TANF recipients have work impairments or disabilities—a figure that was three times that of the non-TANF population. The New York State Scholar Practitioner Team’s data revealed that people had a number of health concerns including chronic asthma, physical limitations, diabetes, and drug addiction.

Photo Voice project, New York State Scholar Practitioner Team, CUNY Graduate Center

"This guy here is selling incense . . . and drinking beer. A lot more people are trying to make money on the street doing things like this." — Nancy, Union Settlement House caseworker, East Harlem
Poverty and joblessness are too often considered to be the fault of individuals and are frequently explained in human capital terms—that is, that people have no skills. Lack of skills will obviously hinder employability, and study participants affirmed the necessity of skills building. Only 14 percent of those who said they did not have a job, however, attributed their unemployment status to the lack of skills and work-related experience. Given that lawmakers and the media frame the reasons for poverty and welfare use as a personal rather than structural issue, this figure is less than one might expect. A human capital analysis does not encompass a critique of the structural barriers to employment; instead, it foregrounds behavioral deficits, directing the blame to the unemployed.

Emphasizing personal deficits obscures the structural explanations that contribute to unemployment, specifically those that lie along axes of race and gender. Racial distinctions were evident in employment patterns among the survey participants. Whites, for example, were twice as likely to be employed as Blacks, and they reported the fewest work-related barriers to employment. Whites were also less likely to cite the lack of job skills or problems finding any job. Three times as many Latinos as whites said they could not find a job that pays enough, and when they were employed, 75 percent of Blacks and Latinos had incomes of less than $5,000 per year compared with 42 percent of whites. The reported inability of Blacks and Latinos to find jobs speaks to possible employer discrimination, which might explain the marked income differentials.

There are also gender distinctions in unemployment patterns. Overall, men and women reported similar reasons for their unemployment status, but there were three genderspecific barriers raised by women: Fifteen percent of women cited lack of childcare; 9 percent said there was domestic violence in their homes; and 8 percent said they were pregnant and, therefore, could not work. Women were also more likely than men to have to care for a sick child or to be unemployed due to lack of pre-school and after-school childcare. The latter suggests that some women do not have the supports to be employed during the typical nine-to-five work day. Additionally, some women indicated they wanted to stay at home, because they preferred to care for their children themselves.

When assessing why some women do not work, University of California, Santa Cruz, professor of politics Gwendolyn Mink argues that we cannot neglect the fact that historically the United States has expected domesticity, rather than wage-earning, from mothers. Thus, it is not unreasonable that some women desire to stay home. Progressive, gender-sensitive social welfare policy in other countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Denmark see domestic care as crucial to processes of social reproduction, and policies in these countries have offered greater support to those engaged in caregiving. Gender-sensitive policies in those countries have centered on women’s participation in part-time labor, allowing them to both work and care for their children. Mink notes that, in the United States, the new welfare law presumes that if a caregiver is unmarried, market-based labor is better than caring for her own children.

Lola, a mother of three, was penalized for choosing to stay home with her youngest child. Since she made the decision to have children, she said, she should be responsible for them, explaining that she worked for six months after her first two children were born and then left them with babysitters. But, when her third child was born, Lola wanted to stay home. Though she indicated she wanted to re-enter the workforce in the future, Lola preferred to return to work when she was ready—a determination she felt she alone should make depending on her child’s development.

Women should be able to choose the model of motherhood that is most important to them. In its original conception in 1935, Aid to Dependent Children, as it was then called, was designed to support full-time caregiving. By the 1960s, employment was encouraged for some segments of the clientele, and by 1988, all AFDC parents with children
three years of age and above were required to work or undergo training. Forced employment among poor women reflects the growth of women’s participation in the labor market since World War II. Reification of the mother load, that is, working and caregiving, is often carelessly linked to the positive and flexible experiences that white middle-class women have had. Walter Stafford, Diana Salas, and Melissa Mendez—policy analysts with the Roundtable of Institutions of People of Color. Women of Color Policy Network at New York University—point out that white women are the primary beneficiaries of such benefits as maternity leave and employer programs that offer flexible work options. Their research found that, while the government is pushing poor women of color, like Lola, into the labor market, white women are increasingly staying home with infants before returning to work.

Given the expectation that women of color work, the issue of childcare becomes critical. The dearth of childcare options in some communities and the mandate to work has meant that younger and older women are caught in a web of mutual survival. Younger women must rely on older women’s availability to care for their children in order to work, and older women are increasingly engaged in caretaking activities as their own benefits are at risk of being reduced or ended.

By focusing on alleged personal failings rather than factors such as race and gender discrimination and inadequate childcare supports, the public discussion about why people might need public assistance—since there are no government obligations to ensure employment—overlooks the very circumstances that might help us adequately understand this situation. The reality that there are too few jobs, especially those that pay living wages, and the myriad concerns specific to mothers belie the dependency discourse that surrounds welfare reform.

Beyond the mandated work hours, work-related activities include job skills training or education related to employment. The rubric of job skills training, however, is very broad, ranging from the acquisition of tangible skills such as computer, clerical, or other job-specific knowledge to so-called soft skills, such as resume writing, interviewing techniques, job searching, and appropriate demeanor with one’s coworkers and supervisors. Since many study participants indicated they had not acquired hard skills, what do WEP experience and training programs teach them?

In a very limited number of cases, study participants reported positive assessments about their WEP assignments and training programs. LeAnn, for example, was a twenty-one-year-old African American woman who reported she was given a good WEP assignment working as a receptionist at a New York City agency. She liked her job and stated, “If they have a position open, then maybe I can get a permanent job.” Similarly, Lena, a Spanish-speaking woman in her twenties, said she had no problems at her training site after she was placed. She complied with all of the rules and successfully completed a training program. Unfortunately, LeAnn and Lena were exceptional cases. Many more described profoundly negative encounters and, indeed, revealed that their hopes of permanent employment may not be realized through WEP.

### Dead End Situations: WEP Assignments and Training Programs

Overwhelmingly, WEP participants said they were required to do chore-focused assignments, often in the municipal system. Placements were frequently with the sanitation department and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, agencies that have been primary users of WEP workers in New York City. The parks department has aggressively utilized WEP labor, as evidenced by the nearly six thousand workers assigned there in 1999. In December 2000, the department had 3,852 WEP workers,
more than any of the other 31 New York City agency WEP placement sites. At that time, the other two city agency WEP sites utilizing the labor of recipients were the Department of Sanitation, with 1,249 workers, and the Human Resources Administration, with 1,434. Some observers have argued that WEP employees’ work has substantially improved the cleanliness of city parks during a time of stringent city budget constraints. Some study participants were aware of these constraints—and aware that they were assigned to work in departments in which the city has a hiring freeze. Between 1993 and 1998, their participation as a labor source neutralized the impact of cutbacks to the parks department.

With forced employment in jobs that do not lead to permanent paid employment and lack of educational opportunity, overall quality of life for poor and working-class people is acutely compromised

One woman, Ivy, described the work assignments as “digging in the dirt,” which minimized her chances to build transferable skills. The nature of placements factored strongly into participants’ concerns about two issues: Many believed the scant training they received would not lead to permanent employment, and parents receiving assistance worried that their children would take note of their parents’ menial work—work that offered no benefits, longevity, or potential for advancement—and would develop negative views of work in general. Ivy, who had three children, challenged the idea that non-working parents are detrimental to the development of a child’s future and their success, arguing that the type of work a child’s parent does is also influential. “They want you to do sanitation . . . go in the parks and pick up the trash . . . walk around and pick up the trash,” Ivy said. “What do I look like to you? You think that’s all I want to do for the rest of my life is picking up trash? I don’t want to teach my kids that. And I don’t want them to be in the rut that I’m in. I’m struggling for them so they can have a better life when they grow up.”

Given welfare reform’s emphasis on formal work, most participants expected their six- to seven-month WEP assignments would lead to permanent employment. The city’s own figures speak otherwise. Of the first 5,300 individuals who entered the job search program, only 5 percent were placed in permanent jobs, according to an HRA analysis. A different study of individuals near or past their time limits recently found that, for 91 percent of respondents, their WEP assignments had not resulted in a permanent job. Among survey participants, only 7 percent received such jobs. WEP has merely cut people off of welfare. It has not, however, helped most find jobs.

Many expressed dismay and disappointment at this reality. Giselle, a young African American with an infant daughter, said, “Anytime they give you an assignment, you would think that . . . if you’d been there for six months, at least you would get hired.” Giselle was exasperated because she was “tired of getting into dead[-end] situations.” She explains, “They know that these city jobs have a freeze on them. And everywhere they have a freeze. That’s why they put me there. And I’m tired of that. That needs to be stopped. My resume is pretty good. I want to go somewhere. If you place me [somewhere] for six months, put me in a situation where I know that the people are at least hiring. Don’t put me in where there is a freeze. That’s what pissed me off the most.”

John, an African American 47-year-old, had a similar experience. Although he was one of the few people who enjoyed his WEP assignment—John was placed at a human rights organization—he acquired new skills, but it did not lead to a permanent job.
It may be argued that work assignments are supposed to assist in the acquisition of basic skills that lead to attachment to work, but most participants considered their placements bereft of opportunity because they rarely received substantive training. Although she was assigned to a training program, Ivy said, “I haven’t seen a computer room, not a training place. . . . I haven’t seen it. And I haven’t seen them really teaching us anything to benefit us. People that have one or two kids in their household need a lot of training.” WEP and training programs would not help her secure employment that would enable her to support her family, Ivy said.

Furthermore, many WEP participants were placed in positions in which their prior skills and education were underutilized or ignored altogether. Lorraine, whose story is told at the beginning of this article, had some college education, but was not placed in a situation where her skills were put to use. Several people reported that caseworkers wanted them to participate in training programs or WEP assignments that were incongruent with their abilities. “How can you put a person out there to clean the street when some of them have an education? . . . [T]hey just put them in the street—even with a diploma—because that’s all they have for now,” said Ivy. The term skills mismatch comes to mind. Although generally used to describe an individual’s dearth of skills, it also is apt to express the skill capital that some people said they possessed, but were unable to draw upon. In several instances, focus group participants reported that their skill level was higher than that required for their WEP placements. Some had lengthy work experience and/or higher education, as was the case with Lorraine, but had been unable to find a job. In these cases, rapid attachment to work and inappropriate placements in an effort to reduce welfare rolls succeeds only in creating a dead-end situation.

*Photo Voice Project, New York State Scholar Practitioner Team, CUNY Graduate Center*

“People can’t afford to buy quality food from the supermarket. So they buy oil and rice off a truck at cheap prices. But this stuff is not healthy. This oil is for cooking, it’s cheaper and lasts longer but sometimes it’s rancid. . . .” —Janette, Harlem resident
We found that a greater percentage of Blacks and Latinos were placed in WEP programs than whites. Thirty-one percent and 32 percent of Blacks and Latinos, respectively, were in WEP programs compared to no whites. The Applied Research Center conducted a study on welfare reform in various cities across the country, and their data suggests that there may be a racial dimension in relation to work-related activities. The Center found that more people of color were required to be engaged in work-related activities than whites. Thirty-three percent of African-Americans and 37 percent of Latinos had to work for their welfare check rather than for wages compared to 28 percent of whites. Such patterns suggest that welfare reform policies may constitute government-funded racial stratification in employment opportunities.

"I Just Need Help":

Higher Education and Work Experience Programs

"I want a better education. I’m on public assistance not because I want the government to support me. I just need help until I finish my degree and get ahead on my own," says Laura, a Latina woman who lives in upper Manhattan. Laura has a five-year-old child, is unemployed, and had just become pregnant when she was interviewed for the study. In spite of these challenges, she ambitiously enrolled in a four-year college program. To Laura’s surprise, her self-initiated efforts were stunted when her caseworker informed her of her options if she wanted to continue receiving benefits: Although Laura was near the end of her semester, she was told that, effective immediately, she must attend night school so as not to interfere with her daytime WEP assignment. Or she could secure a full-time job. If she did neither, Laura would be sanctioned. The only other option, she was told, would be to attend a two-year college, even though she already possessed an Associate’s degree.

Discouraging people from educational attainment represents a shift from 1988, when the Family Support Act expanded educational options for welfare recipients. The act allowed recipients to attend two or four years of college, depending on state provisions, and it considered participation in higher education to be work. Prior to 1996, welfare recipients who were full-time students were exempt from work requirements. But the 1996 federal welfare law does not permit four-year college programs to be counted as work. Making it difficult for participants to obtain higher education is illogical given that the potential return on investment in education is great. One study published by the Educational Testing Service found that as little as one semester of full-time, post-secondary education can raise yearly earnings by as much as $10,000. Such barriers to educational success are fundamentally inconsistent with American values that posit the benefits of education. Welfare reform legislation seems to suggest that poor people should gain just enough work experience or educational achievement to be employed in menial labor. Challenging this limited educational access, advocates proposed a bill, Intro 93, to the New York City Council expanding educational and training opportunities for those receiving assistance. Seth Diamond, Executive Deputy Commissioner for the Family Independence Administration of the Human Resources Administration for New York City, objected to the legislation. He stated at a council hearing that “allowing someone with a five-year federal limit on federal welfare to attend college only half-time as their only activity may not be the most appropriate way to move people toward self-sufficiency.”

Laura was not unlike others who recognized education as one key to success, but whose efforts were undermined by caseworkers promoting work above all else. Two other women, Vilma and Charlene, reported being forced to forego their self-initiated education goals as well. Vilma’s caseworker told her to leave vocational school if she
wanted to continue receiving her public assistance. Charlene’s caseworker instructed her to leave the City University of New York and “take a WEP assignment, or else . . . [be] sanctioned.” In New York City, the work-first mandate caused a precipitous drop in CUNY’s enrollment among those receiving public assistance. Between 1995 and 1998, the enrollment for welfare recipients at CUNY went from twenty-eight thousand to fifteen thousand, according to Center for Community Change, an organization committed to reducing poverty and rebuilding communities. Although the CUNY system created City University WEP in 2000 to accommodate TANF recipients—it allowed internships and Work Study to be used to satisfy their work requirements—state law does not allow students to enroll in non-vocational programs. Liberal arts curriculums were deemed unacceptable educational goals for those receiving assistance. To justify this tactic, some argue that taxpayers should not foot the bill for TANF recipients to attend school if those who don’t receive TANF don’t get the same help. Further, they assert that education and training are not the best predictors of employment, but that work-oriented welfare reform programs are preferred over education and training.

On Hostile Ground: Case Managers and Non-WEP Workers

Welfare reform as presently administered inevitably promotes tensions between recipients and caseworkers, on the one hand, and between recipients and non-WEP workers at WEP sites on the other. Aisha was a young, married, African American woman with two boys who had a third child on the way at the time of the study. She had been in school for the prior few years and cycled on and off welfare depending on her husband’s employment status. Aisha followed all of the requirements in an attempt to make the system work for her, but it was hard. “I just want off . . . completely off,” she said. “I can’t deal with it. It’s a heartache. You have to go constantly [to see caseworkers]. . . . The people at the centers are so nasty. . . . The supervisors don’t help you, nobody does. It’s like, it’s really hard to get somebody [to help] . . . you have to run around for the little bit of public assistance they give you.” Others, too, felt caseworkers were rude, lacked respect for clients, and were notoriously difficult to contact by telephone. Some were known to hang up on clients. Another measure of disrespect was caseworker inefficiency and inadequate monitoring of client progress. This resulted in improper handling of cases, sometimes to the point where a recipient was mistakenly sanctioned.

Antagonistic relations were not limited to interactions with social service staff. Study participants described the circumstances of working with non-WEP employees at their WEP sites. They explained the power non-WEP workers held over WEPs, and they argued that the distinctions between the two groups undermined collaboration and respect. Jay, an African American man in his twenties, lived in a homeless shelter in West Harlem with his wife and two children. Jay was neither in a WEP program nor working due to health problems. But it was his perception that the WEP workers who worked in a park near his shelter, easily identified by their Day-Glo vests—did most of the work. Hostility between the two groups is not surprising given that WEP clearly undercut the stability of non-WEP jobs. Non-WEP workers feel they can be replaced and WEP workers feel they do not get the same benefits or treatment as regular employees. Although federal law does not allow welfare recipients to substitute for paid workers, Gwendolyn Mink notes that some localities do not renew paid workers’ expired employment contracts, therefore opening the way for new, cheaper workfare positions. In essence, then, workfare programs can displace paid workers.

WEP workers’ sense of vulnerability often was heightened by their supervisors’ treatment—at best, lack of concern, and, at worst, passive hostility toward workfare work-
ers—which compromised the receipt of benefits. Jenna, an African American woman in her forties who lived on the Lower East Side, said the WEP supervisor at her assigned police station position routinely failed to submit her time sheets to her coworker. The time sheets proved that Jenna had been at work; without that proof she was subject to sanction for alleged failure to show up—which is exactly what happened, as it had at a previous WEP site. Worksite supervisors, who serve as mediators for WEPs’ compliance with attendance and work requirements, are supposed to report attendance biweekly. As such, supervisors can wield great power over WEPs, which heightens the workers’ sense of vulnerability. Unlike people in the formal wage market, WEP workers have little recourse in such circumstances. Many were forced to rectify such situations by going through a hearing. Reinstatement of benefits can take weeks, even months.

Aisha had been assigned to a BEGIN training program in which her trainer was supposed to submit weekly attendance sheets to Aisha’s case manager. At one point, the sheets had not been submitted or were lost, and Aisha was sanctioned. She only discovered the sanction when her landlord warned her she would receive an eviction notice because social services had not forwarded her rent payment. Aisha, however, always kept copies of her time sheets. Describing the situation, she says, “[S]omeone did not put it on my file [that I was in the program], so I was not [considered to be] in compliance. And, lucky [for me], every time I go to the program, [I] have them sign a piece of paper and they stamp it. I don’t like to be in a jam, you know, when I know that I was there. So I took those papers to have the sanctioned lifted.” Even with the copies as proof, it took six months for her benefits to be reinstated. With difficulty, she managed to avoid being evicted.

Work for Permanent Life Improvements

Welfare reform has forced many people onto an economic precipice with fewer options than ever for support in dire times. With rampant benefit reductions, sanctions, forced employment in jobs that do not lead to permanent paid employment, and lack of educational opportunity, overall quality of life for poor and working-class people is acutely compromised. The fabric of life is frayed. As welfare caseloads rise again due to the weak economy, the situation threatens to worsen.

Research participants reported that they often were unable to buy food, they skipped meals, and relied on food pantries. No matter their race or ethnicity, all survey respondents suffered from such food insecurity, but the rate of Blacks being unable to buy food was nearly twice that of whites. One woman who once received $300 a month in food stamps was forced, under welfare reform, to buy food for her family of four with $70 in food stamps. Another woman living in a homeless shelter received $118 a month in food stamps for herself and her two daughters.

Respondents also reported increased challenges in meeting daily expenses and paying bills. Overall, 69 percent of survey-takers found paying bills harder in the previous year than in years past, and 58 percent said they had been unable to pay at least some bills at all. Blacks and Latinos reported having the hardest time paying bills—70 percent and 77 percent, respectively, compared to 64 percent of whites. One woman, when asked about paying bills, said, “What’s a bill? I can’t afford to make a bill. I don’t buy new things. I only get $137 a month in cash assistance.”

Welfare reform is up for reauthorization in 2004, and the issue of work participation rates and decreased access to education and training sits squarely at the center of the debate. What is not part of the debate are the voices of the people like those described above. Their stories magnify the nuances of policy as it is lived in Manhattan. Although
they may not be representative of the nation’s entire population of welfare recipients, they certainly express one reality about the effects of welfare reform that reaches far beyond the well-worn success stories.

Working off assistance does not represent a mutual exchange. How can it when workers are paid the equivalent of $1.80 an hour? How can it when the work people do and the training they receive cannot—and does not seem designed to—lift them out of poverty?

There is no single solution to the colossal challenges of poverty. There are, however, certainly better solutions than those found in welfare reform. The workfare concept shifts the focus away from the strategies that could truly assist people such as earning a living wage through full employment. A policy of full employment would mean that nearly everyone who wants a job has one. It does not mean that the unemployment rate is zero, but rather that the supply of and demand for labor are in equilibrium and the labor force is fully utilized. Full employment should provide people with meaningful jobs such as was found in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) implemented in the 1930s, and the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA), which was passed in 1973. Both programs created jobs, and participants—and society in general—received numerous benefits. Some WPA programs resulted in the building of parks, roads, schools, and hospitals. Communities had access to school lunches, free theater, and public health services. Though implementation of some of the New Deal projects did not pay sufficient attention to the consequences of race discrimination, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s vision was that work should be “useful ... in the sense that it affords permanent improvements in living conditions.” Although the WPA never provided jobs for all of the seven to eight million people who were unemployed, the two-and-half million it did employ worked in meaningful work projects. CETA created jobs for those who had been engaged in training programs with local community-based organizations. Sociologist Nancy Naples reports that CETA workers found employment in a variety of socially useful jobs including battered women’s shelters and neighborhood organizations, among others.

According to Jared Bernstein, policy analyst with the Economic Policy Institute, and Dean Baker, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, most labor market analysts argue that, in the new economy, the only thing that will help the least skilled is the acquisition of more schooling. Since it is known that subsidizing education will reduce unemployment, self-directed educational plans should be supported. Forcing participants to withdraw from such endeavors does a disservice to their attainment of personal goals, including self-sufficiency. People should certainly be permitted to engage in education, training, and job searches that will provide them with better-paying jobs at living wages—and this should be the mandate for all employers, not just among businesses that benefit from public money. Poverty-wage work should not be privileged in the interest of profit. Those who earn less than a living wage require food stamps, housing assistance, and other social services to survive. Minimum wage does not keep pace with inflation; nor does it close the gap between the rich and the poor.

Having to work off benefits is degrading and, in the long run, unproductive if the WEP assignments are not going to lead to permanent employment or help participants develop real skills. The United States, the world’s richest country, should provide full employment at a living wage for those who can work. This should be at the forefront of domestic concerns.

Notes

1. This article, which was drafted by Dana Davis, reports on the research of the New York State Scholar Team, one of five research groups across the country funded by the Kellogg Foundation’s Devolution Initiative to examine, among other issues, racial disparities and welfare reform. The New York State
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team was based at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and directed by Leith Mullings. Andrea Queeley coordinated the Photo Voice project. A more extensive discussion of the research findings can be found in The Impact of Welfare Reform on Two Communities in New York City (New York: New York State Scholar Practitioner Team, CUNY Graduate Center, 2002) and is available by contacting Dana Davis at dana-davis@purchase.edu or Leith Mullings at LMullings@ge.cm.nyc.edu.

2. The names of all individuals have been changed.


4. House of Representatives, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Public Law 104–193, 104th Congress, H.R. 3734, 22 August 1996 (U.S. Statutes at Large 110): 2105. The Act consists of nine sections addressing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), benefits for legal immigrants, the Food Stamp Program, SSI for children, childcare, the Child Support Enforcement Program, modifications to the child nutrition program, and the Social Services Block Grant. The ninth section concerned miscellaneous issues such as the elimination of housing assistance to fugitive felons, sanctioning of those with positive drug tests, and national goals to prevent teenage pregnancy.

5. This term was used by Pennsylvania State University political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock, whose work elucidates the way political culture organizes the public identity of marginalized groups. Through distorted frames of public issues, consumers accept the hegemonic norms of elite representation. For example, Hancock argues that the disfigured image of Black women on welfare, labeled “welfare queens,” represented a “politics of disgust.” Ange-Marie Hancock, The Public Identity of the “Welfare Queen” and The Politics of Disgust (forthcoming).


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Welfare Law Center, “New York City Implements Major Changes in Manner in Which Applications for Food Stamps, Medicaid, and Cash Assistance are Processed,” Welfare News (April, 1999). http://www.welfarelaw.org/ncsmp.htm. The case, Reynolds v. Giuliani, challenged New York City Jobs Center practices that illegally denied access to Medicaid, Food Stamps, and cash benefits. This was the first case in the country challenging welfare reform implementation practices that illegally denied the right to apply for TANF, state-funded cash assistance, Medicaid, and Food Stamps. The court denied the state defendants’ motion to dismiss the complaint, and ordered the city to comply with legal requirements protecting the rights of individuals to apply for assistance. The city defendants asked for an injunction, which was also denied in 2000. Reynolds vs. Giuliani. Court Decisions, New York Law Journal, (2000): 35.


17. In 2001, the SAP vendors were: Arbor, Federal Employment and Guidance Services (FEGS), Curtis and Associates, and Goodwill Industries of Greater New York.


20. LynNell Hancock, Hands to Work: The Sto-


23. See Dana Davis, Ana Aparicio, Audrey Jacobs, Akemi Koshiyama, Leith Mullings, Andrea Queeley, and Beverly Thompson, The Impact of Welfare Reform in Two Communities in New York City (New York: Graduate Center, City University of New York Ph.D. Program in Anthropology, 2002).

24. The survey was developed in consultation with the Human Rights Project of the Urban Justice Center, which also conducted data analysis.


26. Collaborating groups/programs were: the Maternal Infant and Reproductive Health Program, a program of the New York City Department of Health; Union Settlement Association, which has worked to solve urban problems in East Harlem since 1895; Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement, an interdenominational consortium of city congregations in the Harlem community; and the Lower East Side Family Union (LESFU), a nonprofit neighborhood organization founded in 1974 to prevent the dissolution of families.

27. The eight job centers in Manhattan were Dyckman, East End, East Harlem, Hamilton, Riverview, St. Nicholas, Waverly, and Yorkville.

28. No statistical tests were run on the data, which are therefore not statistically significant.


40. Recent critiques of these policies argue that women work in low-wage, part-time employment and consequently experience occupational segregation and income disparity.


46. Stettner, "Welfare to Work."


48. Stettner, "Welfare to Work."

49. Gordon, Cruel and Usual.

50. Nightingale, Pindus et al., "Welfare and Work Reform."


56. Mink, Welfare’s End.


