

Cash Assistance in Stanislaus County: A Study of TANF and the Protection of Immigrant Children

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Parents participating in 3 focus groups

Sonia Velazquez and the American Humane
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CalWORKs Child-Only Study Advisory Committee
and Immigrant Work Group

. . . and others

This Talk

- Background
 - Immigration and Welfare Issues
 - Family and child well-being
 - United States, California, Stanislaus County
- Study Methods
- Findings
- Insights and Recommendations
- Next Steps

Welfare Eligibility of Immigrants and their Children

- Welfare Reform created TANF in 1996
- CalWORKs is the state's TANF program
- Like many other states, California retained welfare eligibility for virtually all legal immigrants
- Not Qualified Immigrants (NQIs) are excluded
- Citizen children of NQIs are eligible for CalWORKs

TANF, CalWORKs Objectives

- TANF objective: Reduce dependence on government benefits
 - Promote job preparation, work, and marriage
 - Reduce out-of-wedlock births
 - Encourage formation and maintenance of 2-parent families
- CalWORKs objectives
 - Achieve TANF goals without negatively affecting child well-being, demand for county general assistance, or number of families affected by domestic violence
 - Reduce child poverty in state

CalWORKs, Other Program Eligibility

Type of Assistance	Qualified immigrant or citizen	Citizen child of NQI	Non-citizen child of NQI	NQI parent, other NQI adult
Cash – CalWORKs	\$378/ month	\$378/ month	No	No
Cash – GA	\$307/ mo x 3 mos	-	-	No
Food stamps	\$162/ month	\$162/ month	No	No
WIC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
School b/fast, lunch	-	Yes	Yes	NA

Other Program Eligibility (Continued)

Type of Assistance	Qualified immigrant or citizen	Citizen child of NQI	Non-citizen child of NQI	NQI parent, other NQI adult
Rental housing subsidy	Eligible to apply	-	-	No
Prenatal & Emergency Medi-Cal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Full-service Medi-Cal (adult); Healthy Families (child)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Subsidized child care	Yes	-	-	Varies

Welfare Enrollment

- TANF caseload reduction 50%+ in most states 1996 - 2005
- Stanislaus County – 21% CalWORKs enrollment increase 2005 - 2008
- Who's left out?
 - Most CalWORKs cases include no aided adult: not part of WTW revolution, lack cash benefits & assistance
 - Not-Qualified Immigrant (NQI) Cases
 - 18% of CalWORKs caseload
 - Estimated family cash income (work + aid): \$600/month
 - Take-up rate = about 50%

Child Welfare Concerns

- Very little known about parents and children in NQI child-only CalWORKs cases
 - Well-being?
 - Family dynamics?
 - Basis for sound policy and program?
- Poor enough to qualify for CalWORKs
- Grants not calculated to meet family needs

Stanislaus County

- CA San Joaquin Valley; 512,000 residents; per capita income (2005) = \$26,810
- Residents (2007)
 - 73.1% White, 39.% Hispanic/Latino origin
 - Percent of population 25+ with HS diploma: County 75.8%, Statewide 80.2%
 - College-Going Rate, any CA public college or university: County 19.9%, Statewide 48.0%
- Local Economy
 - Agriculture, food manufacturing; construction (now declining)
 - Unemployment (October 2008): County 11.8%, Statewide 8.0%

Study Methods

- Key Informant Interviews – July 2008
 - 1:1 and group interviews (26 individuals)
 - Welfare agency staff (CSA), community service and advocacy organizations
 - NQI population demographics, gov't and non-profit services, application process including barriers
- NQI Parent Focus Groups – October 2008
 - 2 groups with non-receivers; 1 with receivers (total 32 parents)
 - Parents' knowledge, perceptions, experiences

NQI Caseload: Poor, Both Single and Two-Parent

- “Bilingual cases are either a single not-qualified immigrant, or both parents are not-qualified immigrants.”
 - CSA key informant
- Incomes among NQIs generally fall below the poverty line. They “have few resources, little earning power, and few opportunities.”
 - Key informant

NQI Housing Conditions

- Often two or more families live together, typically in run-down rental housing
- NQI families not eligible for rental assistance

Access Challenges

- Not all forms available in Spanish
- Lack of bilingual staff, especially for eligibility interview
- Long application (14 pages), high literacy level required
- Long waits and multiple CSA visits required
- Short recertification period (3 months)
- Long travel times for some
- Occasionally rude staff (less so recently)

Immigration Status & CSA

CSA barred from “helping people to become legal We could be liable if we provide incorrect information. There are no brochures from the INS.”

-- CSA official

Awareness of CalWORKs

- While most focus group participants were aware of CalWORKs benefits, there was a great deal of confusion about the eligibility and benefit structure of the program.
- Several non-receiving participants expressed doubt that, given their immigration status, they could benefit from the program.
- Others in the group were clear about citizen children as the basis of eligibility for a household.

Awareness, Fear, and Desperation

At that time I was in a situation of just not having any food. At that time I was using WIC and [a friend] saw that the only thing I had in the refrigerator were WIC products, like milk and cheese. And my friend told me, 'What point will you get to? Open your eyes. You cannot be this way in the interest of your own children.' So they told me about [CalWORKs] and took me, and then I got an application. I am looking closely at what I would sign because if it says I will be deported I do not want to go back.

-- NQI mother, receiver

CaIWORkS Cash

In reality all it is is a little bit of help, not something you can live off of. If it's that or nothing, well then that's something. At one point I received up to \$600 [per month]. It didn't even pay the rent. It's too little. I don't know how one could depend on just that. You can't. It's too little money.

-- NQI mother, receiver

CalWORKs Motivations

The greatest motivation for using cash aid among families is severe economic hardship resulting in job loss, unsteady work, or having work hours cut. In the words of one NQI parent, “All the doors were closing in on me.”

Other motivations include:

- A serious health issue experienced by self, a spouse or child that led to job dismissal or having to drop out of the workplace.
- A period without work, irregular work or unexpected lay-off.
- “The family grew.”

Fear of Immigration

Fear and ignorance keep the community from tapping into CalWORKs. The community does not know services are available, they fear that they might be reported to immigration, or that it will affect their legalization application later on.

-- an advocate

Other Concerns

- Deduction from children's wages:

“I think that it may affect my son. I wonder if when he begins to work they will take away the amount they give us now from his wages.”

“I fear that when he grows up . . . and works he'll have to pay the whole debt.”

- Reduced educational opportunities for children:

“I've wanted to apply but I think it will affect my daughter's hopes for college and her education – that they won't let her go on or won't give her [financial] help. And that's why we're here – so that she can have the future and life that we didn't have.”

- Children forced to join army:

“I imagine that it could affect [my children] when they're big. That the government will pressure those kids [whose parents received cash assistance] so that they go off to war. Like to charge the kids for what they gave us.”

- Children taken into child welfare custody:

In one case, a mother thought that she would be at risk of losing her child to child welfare authorities if she applied for cash aid, as punishment for not adequately providing for her daughter.

Stigma

- In all three of the focus groups, there was some debate over whether people who receive cash aid allowed themselves to become dependent on government help, should be perceived as less resourceful, and whether long-term receivers are at fault for their dependency.
- A few people who are receiving CalWORKs aid said they feel judged by others for asking for help. They said they had to overcome the shame in addition to the immigration-related fears.

Incentives 1

- Services cut off at home, including gas, cable, telephone and light.
- One participant summed it up as, “I was in a situation such that I could either take that [CalWORKs] or there’s nothing else.”
- A mother said she had so little money that she potty-trained her son at seven months in order to save on diapers. She finally gave in and applied for assistance after the child grew accustomed to potty training as it still did not yield enough savings.

Incentives 2

I want for my children to feel good and to think they're in their home – so that if they are hungry and want to go to the refrigerator and grab some juice, then go my child with all the freedom you deserve and grab what you need. And when they want to go to bed with milk, go grab milk. That is what I want for them.

Just to see their smile when they are eating at their table at home . . . that's nice.

-- statements from two NQI parents

Disincentives

- Application difficulty
- Travel time
- Office time
- Time off work, fear of income and job loss
- Staff rudeness
- Lack of access to clear, useful, and consistent information and advice, especially about immigration consequences

Insights 1

- Our research offers a glimpse of the important role of cash assistance in the lives of the families that do become beneficiaries.
- NQI parents tend to live under very fragile economic conditions with little or no safety net. Stressful life events can spiral into a crises scenario for the entire family.
- Despite the fact that CalWORKs is of relatively substantial economic importance to families, and can provide considerable aid in dire circumstances, NQI parents' utilization of CalWORKs assistance for their citizen children tends to be infrequent and for short periods of time.

Insights 2

- NQI parents' fear of cash assistance, even under very fragile economic circumstances, means that hardship risks to children can compound and last prolonged periods, with potentially detrimental consequences for longer-term well-being.
- Widespread negative perceptions of cash assistance and fears of the immigration consequences of benefit use keep many families from accessing services.
- Families see cash assistance as an adult benefit and believe that they will be held accountable for being a public charge on the state. Other benefit programs such as food stamps, WIC and Medi-Cal are chiefly associated with children.

Recommendations for CSA

- Reach out and clearly address parents' ICE worries; produce, disseminate, and post material explaining the safe use of public benefits for NQI family members; provide contact information to legal assistance or advocates
- Convey message that CalWORKs provides valuable support for *children*
- Provide Spanish translation of all materials, adequate staffing for translation services, and adequate staffing for assistance to those with limited ability to complete forms
- Monitor wait-times, and take needed action; monitor staff attitude and behavior and solicit "safe" customer feedback
- Provide written explanation of customers' ineligibility; review these communications for insight as to possible need for change in CSA outreach and other efforts

Recommendations for CSA, State of California, & US

- Decentralize CalWORKs application and re-qualification process
- Minimize frequency of in-person reporting, re-certification, and re-application
- Implement combined benefits application
- Fully fund COLAs not provided since late 1980s
- Utilize other anti-poverty mechanisms
- Address unauthorized status of families

Questions

What are, or should be, the roles of county agencies with respect to protecting NQI children?

- Child and Family Services Division of CSA
- StanWorks Division of CSA

How can community organizations play a role?

Suggested Next Steps

- Stanislaus County case study: key informant follow-up (CSA Child and Family Services Division)
- Study replication -- additional California and US jurisdictions
- Ethnographic and survey research activities
 - Assess child and adult well-being among NQI families
 - Develop strategies to assist struggling families and communities, schools and workforce development programs, and child welfare agencies

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