

IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE EMPLOYMENT ACTION PILOT PROJECT OFFERED TO IMMIGRANTS ON WELFARE

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Abstract: The study measured the impact of the Employment Action Pilot Project for employable immigrants on welfare in Edmonton, Alberta. Participants were expected to achieve greater and lasting independence from welfare, as the project was intended to reduce barriers to employment in the areas of language skills, computer literacy, life skills, and work experience. The authors contend that the reduction in personal barriers to employment as achieved through employability programs is outweighed by economic incentives and disincentives. While a person is on welfare, obtainable wage levels in comparison to welfare benefit levels strongly influence the kind of opportunities taken and whether the person leaves welfare. In contrast, when one is accessing welfare, immediate financial need is seen as the most important factor, regardless of wage levels in the marketplace.

Résumé: L'étude a mesuré les effets d'un projet pilote d'action emploi ayant comme objectif l'intégration au marché du travail des immigrants prestataires d'aide sociale à Edmonton, Alberta. Le projet visait à établir et prolonger l'auto-suffisance des participants en réduisant les barrières à l'emploi telles que langue, connaissances en informatique, adaptation social, et expérience de travail. Les auteurs soutiennent que, pour les prestataires d'aide sociale, la réduction des barrières à l'emploi s'avère moins important que la considération de gains économiques. La décision de s'intégrer au marché du travail ou de demeurer dépendant de l'aide social semble être basée sur l'évaluation de la rémunération par rapport au niveau de prestations. Toutefois, les familles ont recours initialement à l'aide social surtout en raison de besoins financiers immédiats.

That welfare provides an economic incentive for persons to access it, and a disincentive to leave it, is certainly strongly believed by the public at large. According to a 1988 Gallup poll, 35% of Canadians believed welfare recipients could get by without assistance (Gallup, 1988). More recently, a Decima poll found 90% of Canadians, in all regions of the country, supporting some form of work or training for those on welfare (Greenspon, 1994).

According to some researchers and columnists, the levels of welfare payments in Canada (or more specifically, the provinces) over the past 30 years have directly affected the choices Canadian women have made not only to access welfare, but also to have children out of wedlock, to divorce, and to opt out of the labor force (Allen, 1993; Frum, 1994a, 1994b). Burtless (1990) and others present this thinking from the American perspective. Although statistical support can be found for these arguments, more thought and analysis is needed to determine the degree to which these common-sense, and perhaps simplistic, views should drive welfare policy in general and eligibility criteria, benefit levels, and employability programs in particular.

Because welfare in Canada is needs-tested, applicants must be in desperate need to be accepted onto welfare. They must have a very minimal amount of cash and assets and must have exhausted all other means of support. Applicants have to disclose a great deal of their private circumstances. In essence, they have to admit failure. The incentive for the welfare applicant appears to be not how large the welfare payment is, but the fact that there is one at all.

The amount, or level, of the welfare benefit, including utilization of prescription and dental benefits, is determined by family size. The incentive in the marketplace, on the other hand, is mainly the wage and employment benefits available to the head of the family unit (often a single parent), irrespective of family size. Therefore, programs aimed at reducing employment barriers must contend with the fact that larger family units receive higher welfare benefits and have higher utilization of extended health benefits. Programs designed to reduce employment barriers, and ultimately reduce welfare caseloads, must have a greater impact on potential earning power for a family of four than a family of two. Some policy options are to increase the minimum wage, to increase the Federal Child Tax Benefit, to provide extended or transitional health benefits to the working poor, to decrease welfare benefits for larger families, or to be more forceful in having adults on welfare (including spouses) accept low-paying jobs.

Taken together, these observations indicate that people come onto welfare largely because of need and desperation, and not because they have an array of options from which to choose. However, once they are on the system, recipients seem to engage in a more complex sort of reasoning. We believe that recipients leave welfare primarily owing to economic incentives and disincentives, and that this factor may be stronger than the effect of interventions designed to reduce personal employment barriers, such as the intervention examined in this study.

THE STUDY

The study measured the impact on welfare dependency of the Employment Action Pilot Project. The project focused on immigrant welfare recipients who entered the program at the beginning of June 1993. All participants were from an Edmonton district office of Alberta Family and Social Services. The program was offered by the Edmonton Catholic School District Continuing Education Branch and was funded by Alberta Family and Social Services. The study was designed to determine whether recipients leave Supports for Independence (SFI), Alberta's welfare program, in significant numbers over the course of and following completion of the program. The study also determined whether the reported earnings for those remaining on the welfare caseload had increased.

The district office expected that recipients would leave welfare throughout the program as they gained skills on a weekly basis. However, some clients may have had a tendency not to leave the program early, as they could rely on receiving welfare benefits without other requirements for the full duration of the program. Similarly, some clients may have had a tendency to remain in the more sheltered work environment provided by the program. Therefore, the full effect of the intervention could not be expected until after the program had concluded.

The impact measurement did not constitute a full evaluation of the program. A complete evaluation would also have examined all objectives of the program and determined the extent to which those objectives were being met, which would have necessitated contact with program participants, staff, and other stakeholders to collect qualitative and further quantitative data. However, the study did benefit from a report based on qualitative case reviews provided by

the Edmonton Catholic School District (ECSD) Continuing Education staff, who delivered the program (ECSD, 1993).

The Program

The Employment Action Pilot Project built on an ESL (English as a Second Language) program. It attempted to integrate immigrants into the workforce by working in conjunction with employers while also providing instruction in ESL. The project ran for up to twenty weeks for each client, and included two weeks of assessment; six weeks of English-language training, life skills, and computer skills; three weeks of work experience preparation; six weeks of work experience; and a final three weeks of evaluation and placement.

Participants

In any given month in 1993 there were approximately 1,000 recent immigrant clients on welfare in Alberta (having arrived in Canada during the previous two years). Earlier research by the welfare department indicated that approximately 65% of immigrant clients were refugees and 35% were sponsored or independent immigrants. The average family size of immigrant clients was similar to that of nonimmigrant clients (2.1 persons). Interestingly, immigrant clients were reported to have higher education levels than nonimmigrant clients. The cost per case of immigrant clients was similar to that of nonimmigrant clients (\$840 per month, including medical and dental benefits). In 1993 the department spent approximately one million dollars per month providing welfare benefits to recent immigrants.

Participants in the study were referred to the project in May of 1993 by Family and Social Services staff of the district office. Of the 46 clients referred, 24 were initially accepted into the project. One week later a further 15 single mothers were accepted into the project as a second program group.

Immigrant welfare recipients were accepted into the project on the basis that they were (a) motivated to become employed within the 20-week period of the program; (b) had accepted the premise that job search practice and work experience are important elements in obtaining employment and becoming independent; and (c) had already achieved an "intermediate" level of understanding of the English language as determined through the Edmonton Catholic School

Assessment Test. Immigrant welfare recipients were rejected by the project staff if it was felt they did not meet these entrance criteria.

METHODOLOGY

The group of 22 clients not accepted into the project was monitored as a comparison group. Theoretically, it was expected that this group would not leave welfare or increase reported earnings at a higher rate than the program groups.

A second comparison group consisted of a complete population cohort of 318 recent employable immigrant welfare recipients (clients). Their welfare dependency (percentage of clients on welfare each month) was monitored over an earlier one-year period (11-plus months) to determine the normal or average rate at which comparable clients left the system and to determine which client characteristics had a significant impact on welfare dependency. For this second comparison group, the study selected only immigrant clients who had been in Canada for more than one year, ensuring that few, if any, would be refugee claimants awaiting a decision on their remaining in Canada.

The two program groups (participants in the Employment Action Project) were made up of Group 1, the main program group consisting of 24 immigrant clients; and Group 2, consisting of 15 single-parent female immigrant clients.

Two impact measures, applied to welfare impact studies in general, were used. One measure was the attrition rate, which is the actual proportion or percentage of clients remaining on welfare each month. For those clients remaining on welfare, the evidence of increased income from declared earnings provided the second impact measure. The labor market environment was similar for the program groups and the two comparison groups. The unemployment rate in Edmonton during the study period averaged 9.5%.

Limitations

One limitation of the impact measurement was that it considered the direct impact only over the short term (less than nine months). However, it was apparent from the findings that by the eighth month the program's effect on attrition rates had declined. Clients in the

program and comparison groups were no longer leaving welfare at a significant rate.

The 22 comparison group clients had not been randomly assigned to the main comparison or program groups. However, the selection criteria gave relatively strong reason to think that the main comparison group would not perform as well as the main program group in relation to the impact measures used.

Contact was not made with the 22 comparison group clients to determine other influences that may have led them to leave welfare. Members of the comparison group may have entered other ESL or employment enhancement programs. However, as the findings will indicate, such programs can actually increase time on welfare over the short to medium term.

In contrast, attrition rates of the comparison group may also have increased as an indirect result of the existence of the project. This is so because welfare clients who do not avail themselves of opportunities to improve employability can be cut off welfare.

Whereas the attrition measurement of the employable immigrant population cohort followed clients over time (11-plus months), the analysis of the relationship of employment barriers to attrition was based on a cross-sectional analysis of this population: the study did not follow the clients in the population longitudinally to observe how their specific employment barriers changed over time. The relationships are therefore inferred statistically. This qualification is stated only to remind the reader that all cross-sectional analyses are limited by not following the clients through time as the various variables of interest change.

Lastly, the variables used to compare and analyze the program and comparison groups were limited to those currently entered by staff on the department's information system.

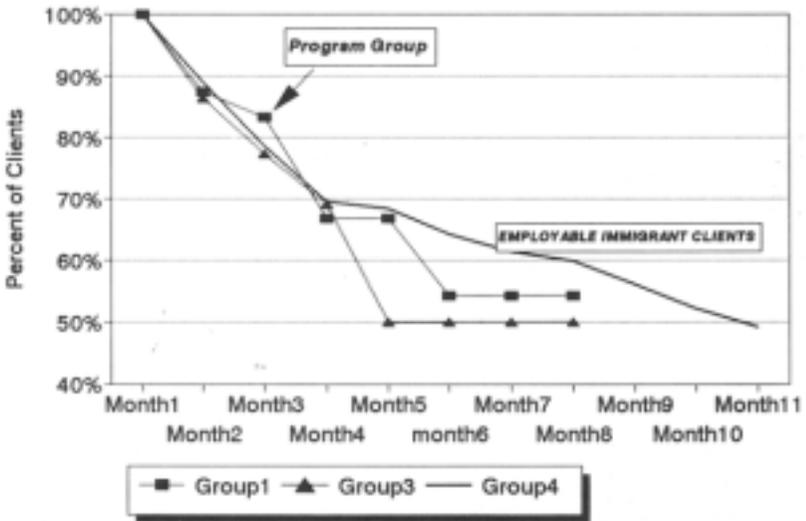
FINDINGS

For each month following the starting month of the program (June 1993), clients in the program and comparison groups (and their related welfare benefits and declared income from earnings) were monitored. Table 1 shows the number of clients on the system since the program began. For the main program group (Group 1), 54% of

participants were on welfare after the eighth month. For the single-parent program group (Group 2), 100% of participants in the program were on welfare. The organization delivering the program believed that some of the single-parent group members had found employment. However, this had not yet translated into their leaving welfare or increasing their earnings as reported to the welfare office. The reason for this discrepancy might have been that welfare payments are advances (based on the previous month's income) whereas wages are paid after two to four weeks of employment. Therefore, a lag of two months in reflecting the transition from welfare payments to employment is not unusual.

For the main comparison group (Group 3), 50% of the clients were on welfare after the eighth month. For the second comparison group (the population cohort, Group 4), 55% were on welfare after the eighth month. Differences between Group 1 and Group 3 after the eighth month were minimal in relation to attrition. The findings are represented graphically in Figure 1. Clearly, the “flat of the curve” was reached by the eighth month, and significant movement of clients off the caseload in the months ahead was unlikely.

Figure 1
Percentage of Immigrant Clients on Assistance over Time



The “poor” showing of the two program groups relative to the comparison groups may have been due in part to the fact that in the short term such programs result in clients taking longer to leave welfare, as they spend active time in the programs. However, those clients who do leave welfare may not return as quickly as clients in the comparison groups. In other words, there may have been “more positive” results for the program group over the very long term. The more time that passed, however, the less able we were to attribute positive impacts to the program itself. From the internal qualitative case study report, conducted by the Edmonton Catholic School District staff, it could be determined that most welfare recipients who left the program did so because they found employment (ECSD, 1993).

Regarding increased earnings for those who did not leave welfare, only three clients in the two program groups reported earnings. Neither the number of clients reported to be in receipt of earnings nor the amount of reported earnings (for the three clients) increased over the period of the study.

Client Characteristics

Demographic characteristics of the four groups compared in the study are found in Table 2. (For some of the variables, data were not available in sufficient numbers to justify reporting them). However, for

Table 1
Attrition Rates of Program and Comparison Groups

Month	Program Groups		Comparison Groups	
	Program Main GROUP 1	Program S. Parent GROUP 2	Comparison Main GROUP 3	Comparison Population GROUP 4
Month1	24 (100%)	15 (100%)	22 (100%)	318 (100%)
Month2	21 (88%)	15 (100%)	19 (86%)	283 (89%)
Month3	20 (83%)	15 (100%)	17 (77%)	250 (79%)
Month4	16 (66%)	15 (100%)	15 (68%)	221 (69%)
Month5	16 (66%)	15 (100%)	11 (50%)	217 (68%)
Month6	13 (54%)	15 (100%)	11 (50%)	204 (64%)
Month7	13 (54%)	15 (100%)	11 (50%)	201 (63%)
Month8	13 (54%)	15 (100%)	11 (50%)	195 (61%)

Table 2
Characteristics of the Program and Comparison Groups

Variable	Program Groups		Comparison Groups	
	GROUP 1 Program Main (n=24)	GROUP 2 Program S. Parent (n=15)	GROUP 3 Comparison Main (n=22)	GROUP 4 Comparison Population (n=318)
% prev. on assistance	33.3	53.3	47.3	59.1
Months on assistance	25.6	35.4	29.8	2.5
Months since employed	n/a	n/a	n/a	23.5
% female	30.1	100.0	43.3	26.1
Age (yrs.)	36.8	29.1	34.8	32.9
Education	n/a	n/a	n/a	12.9
Family size	2.6	2.8	2.5	2.0
Months in Canada	n/a	n/a	n/a	16.6

Group 4, the comparison population of employable immigrant clients, data were available for over 80% of cases, except for the variable “months since last employment,” where only 57% of cases had data available. (This lack of data on one of the independent variables was a weakness of the analysis conducted on the immigrant client population.)

Even though the average number of months on assistance is quite different for the population cohort and the three other study groups (see Table 2), the relation of the variable “previous months on assistance” (covering only the current period or episode of assistance) to welfare dependency was not found to be statistically significant in the logistic regression analysis that follows (this finding also occurred in the other three groups). Therefore, the population cohort was comparable, statistically, with the other three groups.

Multivariate Analysis of the Population Cohort

Using the population cohort of recent employable immigrant welfare recipients (Group 4), a logistic stepwise regression model was developed to determine which of the variables in Table 2 were statistically significant in explaining the clients’ likelihood of leaving

welfare. The model was also developed to measure the degree of statistical effect the relevant variables had on immigrant clients leaving welfare (i.e., attrition of clients). A logistic regression, as opposed to a linear regression model, was necessary because the original dependent variable of “months on assistance” had only 11 units (11 months), and because a linear relationship with the dependent variable was not possible as most of the cases were in the 11th month (were still on welfare). For the logistic model, the dependent variable was therefore changed to “0” for “on assistance” and “1” for “off assistance.” The resulting equation was: $\text{constant} = 2.18 + (-.81)(\text{male } 0, \text{ female } 1) + (-.46)(\text{family size}) + (.67)(\text{previously on assistance, } 0; \text{ not previously on assistance, } 1) = \log \text{ odds}$. Statistical significance was set at the .05 level. The antilog was applied to convert the output from the equation to the normal odds ratios found in Table 3.

Some variables, such as level of education, previous attachment to the labor market, previous months on welfare, degree of adjustment to the new country, and single-parent status, were thought to be important drivers of attrition. However, in the analysis the potential indicators of these variables as measured by “years of education,” “months since last employment,” “months on assistance,” “months in Canada,” and “being a single parent,” were not found to be statistically significant determinants of immigrant clients leaving welfare. The only three variables found to be statistically significant were whether or not the client had a previous period on assistance, the sex of the client, and family size.

The above findings deserve to be tested using a sample of nonimmigrant welfare clients. The findings point to the possibility that the main reason clients remain on welfare is economic (based on family size): the amount of income welfare recipients can earn versus the income they need to meet basic needs is directly related to their sex and, especially, their family size. Females are generally not able to command as high a level of earnings as males, and basic needs increase with family size. The primary explanation for remaining on assistance may therefore not be barriers to employment, such as time in Canada, date of last employment, or level of education, but rather the amount of earnings one can generate compared to what is issued on assistance.

Table 3 shows the nature of the relationship between sex and family size and the impact of the variables on leaving welfare over a one-year period (11-plus months). The odds of leaving welfare after

a one-year period for a male client of family size one and no previous period of assistance were 4.86 to 1. The probability of such a client leaving welfare after the one-year period was .83, or 83%. The odds of being off assistance after the one-year period decreased as family size increased, by about 10% per unit increase in family size. The odds of leaving welfare for a female immigrant client of family size one, with no previous period of assistance, were 2.16 to one (the percent likelihood was 68%). Thus, for immigrant welfare recipients sex was a greater barrier to leaving welfare than having one additional family member but not greater than having two additional family members.

There may be additional barriers related to sex, such as cultural influence, lack of support mechanisms, concern for health benefits for children, and reluctance to leave the care of a very young child to others. However, regarding family size, the likely explanation was that what a welfare recipient could earn as income in the marketplace was significantly lower than what he or she needed to maintain a household at a basic minimum. The income an employable immigrant client could receive on welfare, including medical and dental benefits, was greater than what he or she could earn, making welfare economically more attractive. For singles especially, the income from welfare in Alberta was considerably less than what one could earn working part-time or for minimum wage in the marketplace; therefore single clients were much more likely to move off welfare.

A related argument involved health benefits alone. The income required to meet prescription, dental, and optical needs (provided on

Table 3
1993 Population Cohort of Immigrant Clients' Likelihood of Leaving Welfare over a One-Year Period

No Prev. Period	Male Client		Female Client	
	Odds Ratio	% Likelihood	Odds Ratio	% Likelihood
One	4.86	83	2.16	68
Two	3.06	75	1.36	58
Three	1.92	65	.85	46
Four	.83	55	.54	35
Five	.75	43	.34	25

welfare) increased by family size (and by sex, as most single parents are female). It may be that the health benefits received on welfare acted as a barrier to leaving welfare for family sizes above one or two.

Even when the above model was run on clients who had a previous period of assistance—a group with greater barriers to employment—the findings were similar. It is therefore highly likely that economic factors are the most important in moving immigrant clients, and possibly nonimmigrant clients, off welfare.

Adjusted Findings Using the Statistical Model

Because the client characteristics of the groups being compared in the study differed on the three variables found to be statistically significant (see Table 2), and because the groups were compared over eight months, instead of the one year (11-plus months) of time used in the logistic regression model, the model was re-run using only eight months of data, and the findings per group were then adjusted (with the coefficients from the model) to make the groups comparable (statistically) on the significant variables. The original findings after eight months are shown in Table 4 along with the adjusted findings.

Group 1 clients (the main program group) left the project at a rate identical to that expected by the model. As no clients from Group 2 left welfare over the eight months, and as it was expected that 30% would leave, when the relevant variables are adjusted for the project appears to have had a negative effect upon single-parent clients over the period of the study. On the other hand, Group 3 clients, the main comparison group, performed slightly better than expected.

Table 4
Actual and Adjusted Attrition Rates of Program and Comparison Groups after Eight-Month Period

	GROUP 1 Program Main	GROUP 2 Program S. Parent	GROUP 3 Comparison Main	GROUP 4 Comparison Population
Attrition Rate				
Actual	54%	100%	50%	61%
Adjusted	54%	70%	56%	61%

DISCUSSION

The Employment Action Pilot Project, over the short term (eight months), did not result in immigrant welfare recipients moving off welfare more quickly (or increasing their declared earnings) than comparable immigrant clients not receiving the program, or immigrant clients in general.

Based on the findings, however, it does not automatically follow that welfare offices serving significant immigrant populations should not invest in programs to help immigrant welfare recipients become independent. Such programs may help clients integrate better into the community, and perhaps eventually move off the welfare caseload. These programs might be seen as stepping stones in a continuum of programs, allowing immigrant welfare recipients to access other programs with a more direct impact on attrition. In the current study, the more qualitative findings of the case studies carried out by the Edmonton Catholic School District made it clear that participants had undergone a good deal of personal development and acculturation over the course of the pilot project (ECSD, 1993).

Based on the study findings, both welfare program staff and outside agency staff delivering programs to immigrant clients should examine more closely the needs of female clients. The ECSD case studies and summary report show that the project did go some distance to entertain those needs:

Situations such as finding reliable child care and seeking out dependable support systems were discussed as well as the importance of resolving these barriers so as not to interfere with future employment. . . . [Female clients] all improved their speaking skills and became more confident. (ECSD, p. 2)

If the more special needs of single-parent female immigrant clients were being examined and addressed, this might lend further support to the argument that the economic disincentives to leaving welfare are stronger than efforts at reducing personal employment barriers.

Immigrant welfare recipients, and quite possibly their nonimmigrant counterparts, appear to remain on assistance not because of employment barriers such as months since last employment, years of education, age, and months in Canada, but rather because the income they can receive off welfare is not greater (including health and dental benefits) than what they can receive on welfare. A re-

cent analysis of American data by the General Accounting Office indicated that the findings do extend beyond immigrant clients. It was found that the probability of leaving assistance was (highly) negatively correlated to family size (U.S. GAO, p. 43).

The findings may therefore justify stronger enforcement of clients' taking employment, and may even justify benefit reductions the longer a client remains on assistance. The alternative, of course, is to consider that the wages that can be commanded in the marketplace are too low, combined with the fact that low-paying jobs usually do not include extended health benefits for prescription, dental, and optical needs. (Premium waivers or subsidies for the Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan should reduce the problem of basic health care coverage once off assistance.) It may be the case that wages are a stronger disincentive for singles and health benefits a stronger disincentive for families with children.

It is also important to better define those groups of clients who do not benefit from programs that reduce personal employment barriers. From the above findings it has been determined that clients with larger family sizes may not leave assistance even if barriers are reduced. Possibly this group can be examined further and a profile developed that better describes it. Qualitative research, through focus groups or personal interviews with clients (as well as interviews with income support workers), may provide further insights into means of moving this client group to independence.

Both the public and the welfare program have been concerned that welfare benefits for single employable clients be low enough to act as an economic incentive to leaving welfare. The study findings suggest that the high attrition rate of single clients was likely due to the low benefits they received on welfare. Clients left the system not because their employment barriers were low or because those barriers had been reduced through programs, but because they had no dependents and their needs could be met through employment income, even at minimum wages. The findings indicate welfare programs should continue to be concerned that benefits to single employable clients not be higher than what they can earn in the marketplace, and that market wages for entry-level jobs be high enough to act as an incentive to leave welfare.

Lastly, interventions of a short- to medium-term nature (three to six months) likely keep clients on assistance a little longer than no intervention at all, as clients go through the programming weeks; these interventions may not be more effective over the medium term in

comparison with the normal attrition rate of clients in general. In particular, when a client first enters the welfare system, it is unlikely that any program intervention in the first two or three months would improve upon the already high attrition rate that exists in the employable welfare population. In the Alberta system, for example, even prior to the recent welfare reforms, between 30% and 40% of employable welfare recipients leave the system after only two months on assistance (Alberta Family and Social Services, 1991). Concerning female single parents specifically, 20% leave the welfare caseload after two months on assistance and 50% after six months. In the first two or three months on assistance the client is likely preoccupied with meeting basic needs (the reason he or she accessed welfare) and is not at this early stage influenced by considerations of incentives and disincentives to leave welfare. Very early intervention with clients may be counterproductive and inappropriate. Therefore, O'Neil (1990) claims that it is the longer-term clients who benefit most from employment programs.

CONCLUSION

The current impact assessment was unable to find a significant difference between the program and comparison groups. The internal qualitative report by the school board describes in a revealing way how employability programs must compete with an already high rate of attrition: it was apparently difficult for the agency to maintain funding for the project because many clients left the program before it ended (ECSD, p. 11). When evaluations of employability programs utilize rigorous methodologies with comparison or control groups, the results are usually only modest. The question left unanswered is: Would tougher work requirements have made a greater difference, or more expensive education and training initiatives (Gueron, 1990)?

Any programming to reduce employment barriers must be examined from the perspective of incentives and disincentives. The question to ask is: Will the program likely result in the client's being able to command more income in the marketplace than he or she can obtain on assistance? If the answer is no, then the client may be more likely to remain on assistance even if his or her employment barriers are reduced.

However, an important, and often overlooked, side effect of such programming is its impact on nonparticipants. Most welfare programs strongly emphasize clients' improving their situation by participating in training opportunities and making themselves available for employment. If clients fail to take such steps to becoming inde-

pendent, welfare agencies can reduce or terminate benefits. The existence of opportunities, including the Employment Action Pilot Project, allows the welfare agency to put pressure on nonparticipants to leave welfare. Therefore, attrition rates of nonparticipant comparison groups may in fact not be independent. The welfare administration (and the state) can better justify the redirection of public funds from those clients who could (but do not) take advantage of offered opportunities to improve themselves, to those who do.

Whereas the economics of welfare programs is concerned with attrition rates and increased program independence, a program such as the Employment Action Pilot Project has other features that are perhaps as important, but rarely can be associated directly with measurable fiscal and economic impacts on clients and government. These social and often political aims and impacts could and quite often do supersede any considerations of cost-effectiveness in narrow program terms.

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