

**Toy, V.S. (1998, April 15). "Does workfare work? Tough workfare face rules used as way to cut welfare rolls". *The New York Times*, pp. A1, A27.**

Teenagers—rich, poor, and middle class—ought to be aware of their own economic futures, what it's like to be poor, and the cost of poverty to individuals, families, and society. For years welfare has been seen as an inadequate, if not counterproductive, relief for especially the children of poverty. New York City is pushing welfare reform through its workfare program examined in a series of four articles (this the fourth and final article in this series).

New York's Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani has tried to reform and reduce welfare in his city by creating a system of public workfare jobs that would lead to "real jobs." Sanctions penalize and mean to motivate clients to move from dependency to temporary, part- or full-time workfare jobs to more permanent employment. This final article considers the sanctions used and evaluates the system's real effectiveness.

The Mayor says his workfare program has given dependents on welfare a new work ethic and a real path to jobs. His figures are impressive; the welfare rolls have dropped more than 30% in three years...from 1.16 million to 797,000.

His critics and the Times, however, say that the program has led very few into real jobs. Instead "workfare has become welfare's back door, allowing the city to trim thousands of people from the rolls each month for violating its work rules." The article continues,

To the Mayor and his aides, sanctions are used sensibly and appropriately. Even so, the process is meant to be tough: a big stick is needed, they say, to teach the discipline of work, of getting up in the morning, every morning, and showing up at a job on time.

But advocates for the poor argue that the city has overzealously enforced often technical rules without sufficient regard to the lives and dignity of the truly needy—but with considerable attention to the political benefits of trimmer welfare rolls. The sanctions process, they say, has created a sizable churning of the rolls, in which thousands of people are dropped each month, only to return later.

According to the Human Resources Administration of New York State's Department of Social Services, "in the first eight months of 1997 about 16% of workfare participants were cut from the rolls for infractions that ranged from showing up late to refusing a particular work assignment." Here is how the figures broke down:

- \* Of 36,000 clients on workfare each month, 6,100 were sanctioned.
- \* Of these, 3,770 of them appealed.
- \* Of these, 2,070 had hearings.
- \* Of these, 1,400 were reinstated.
- \* Many more went back on welfare rolls.

" 'It's like musical chairs, where there are 9 chairs but 12 people,' " says Liz Krueger, associate director of the nonprofit Community Food Resource Center. " 'The real number of people needing welfare is

still 12, but the caseload is only 9.' "

New screening processes make welfare easier to lose and harder to get. The Mayor says these screening procedures help weed out welfare cheats who give false addresses and hide sources of income. Advocates for the poor see the process and sanctions turning "public assistance from a full-time program into a part-time one—with part of the year spent on the rolls and part spent trying to get on or waiting out a penalty." The following story is indicative of the conflict:

Enrique Segarra Sr. was told he would lose his benefits about a year ago because he was half an hour late on the first day of his workfare assignment. He said he thought he had allowed enough time for his three-fare trip—from bus to subway to another bus.

But when he arrived at the Bronx Sanitation Department garage at 7:30 a.m., the supervisor wouldn't listen to his explanations and sent him home with instruction not to return. Two weeks later, he was notified that the process to cut off his welfare benefits had begun because he had violated workfare rules by arriving late without a written excuse. At a state hearing, Mr. Segarra produced bus schedules proving he could not have gotten to the garage any earlier, and the city withdrew its plan to cut him off.

The Mayor's senior advisor says, " 'If people have a good reason to be excused, they are excused. And if there are instances of sanctions that are inappropriate, we try to correct it right away.' " Many welfare recipients and advocates, however, see instances where people lose their benefits because supervisors enforce rules much more rigidly than would occur in real jobs in the private or public sectors.

For some, the moves from welfare to workfare to permanent jobs have worked out well. Nancy Jiminez, 28, is a lifelong New Yorker and one of a thousand who have moved through workfare to more permanent full-time jobs...for Nancy, a clerical position at the Housing Authority. She tells new workfare participants, " 'I feel workfare is good. It gives people an opportunity to do something for themselves' "

Kathleen Parks, 43, on the other hand, was unable to prove she was taunted and had bottles thrown at her by an ex-boyfriend as she left her workfare site. Co-workers tried to defend her. She lost her appeal, however, because she could not produce proof. Months later, her original welfare benefits were reinstated by another judge.

Annalee Sinclair, 36, was plagued by severe asthma, hypertension, and back pains. She says she collapsed on the street while returning from work. Sanctions removed her benefits, and she was turned down by a judge at her first hearing. Later she was returned to the welfare rolls.

Irv Garfinkel, professor at Columbia University's School of Social Work, has requested the Guiliano administration to study "what happens to people when they leave welfare" but has been denied. The Administration also refused information to the Times which sued. The State Supreme Court has ordered release of the information, but the city is expected to appeal the decision.

In the absence of studies, Professor Garfinkel's theory stands between the opinions of the Mayor and advocates for the poor:

My guess is that about one third of the people already had jobs and are managing fine without welfare. Another third are getting jobs, which is the Mayor's story, and the other third can't get it together and the changes have made it impossible to function in the system, and that's the advocates' story.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. Would you applaud this effort to reform welfare? What do you see as the benefits of the New York Mayor's reforms? Do you see any dangers, and, if so, what are they?
2. If you were single and poor with children, what obstacles would stand in the way of your working and providing for your family? What help would you need?
3. What would be your basic five principles or strategy for dealing with the poor of society?
4. What questions do you have about this subject, and what would you like to discuss further?

## **IMPLICATIONS**

1. Young people tend to understand and feel our responsibility to the neediest in society.
2. We must seek ways to foster the dignity of the poor and their capacity to take care of their own needs.
3. Almost everyone supports welfare reform. Ideas as to how this should happen and how much it will cost vary greatly.
4. Successes in welfare reform should be noted. We must make public policies work in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Jackson, Los Angeles—and in the poor rural sections of the U.S.
5. All religions have serious and special concern for the poor. A better world would be more aware of the teachings of the various faiths on this subject.

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