

Immigrants and the Child-Only TANF Caseload: A Case Study of Access/Barriers to Aid in Stanislaus County, CA

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This Talk

- Background
 - Recession, immigration, and welfare
 - Family and child well-being
 - United States, California, Stanislaus County
- Study Methods
- Findings
- Insights, child welfare angle, public policy
- Recommendations and next steps

Recession & Relevance

Unemployment rate

	July 2008	April 2009
United States	5.8%	8.9%
California	7.6%	11.0%
Stanislaus County	11.1%	16.7%

Welfare Eligibility of Immigrants and their Children

- TANF in CA = CalWORKs
- California retained welfare eligibility for virtually all authorized immigrants
- Unauthorized immigrants, including those very poor, are excluded from benefits because of their immigration status (hereinafter, “Not Qualified Immigrants” or NQIs)
- Income-eligible citizen children of NQIs are – as of this writing – qualified for CalWORKs until age 18

TANF, CalWORKs Objectives

TANF: Reduce dependence on gov't benefits

- Promote job preparation, work, and marriage
- Reduce out-of-wedlock births
- Encourage formation and maintenance of 2-parent families

CalWORKs

- 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

Welfare Enrollment

- TANF caseload reduction 50%+ most states by 2005
- Stanislaus County: 21% CalWORKs enrollment increase 2005 - 2008
- Who's left out? Most CalWORKs cases now without aided adults
 - Not part of WTW revolution
 - No cash benefit for adult(s), no child care or other assistance
- Not-Qualified Immigrant (NQI) Cases
 - 18% of CalWORKs caseload
 - Estimated family cash income (work + aid): \$600/month
 - Take-up rate = about 50%

CalWORKs, Other Program Eligibility*

Type of Assistance	Qualified adult immigrant or citizen	NQI parent, other NQI adult	Citizen child of NQI	Non-citizen child of NQI
CalWORKs	\$363-82 /mo	No	\$363-82 /mo	No
Food stamps	\$200 /mo	No	\$200 /mo	No
WIC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
School breakfast, lunch	-	-	Yes	Yes

*Maximum \$ amounts listed

Other Program Eligibility (Continued)

Type of Assistance	Qualified immigrant or citizen	NQI parent, other NQI adult	Citizen child of NQI	Non-citizen child of NQI
Rental housing subsidy	Yes	No	-	-
Prenatal & Emerg Medi-Cal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Full Medi-Cal or Healthy Families*	Yes	No	Yes	No
Subsidized child care	Yes	Varies**	-	-

* Proposed for elimination by Governor

** By program

NQI Cases: Child Welfare Concerns

- Current policy not need-based
 - Families poor enough to qualify for CalWORKs, but grants not calculated to meet needs of entire family
- Very little known about parents and children
 - Well-being?
 - Family dynamics?
- Current economic crisis → further challenge to well-being of children and families

Stanislaus County

- CA San Joaquin Valley; 512,000 residents; per capita income (2006) = \$27,811, 70% of statewide figure
- Residents (2007)
 - 50% White, not Hispanic; 39% Hispanic/Latino origin
 - Population 25+ with HS diploma: County 76%, Statewide 80%
 - Low College-Going Rate: County 20%, Statewide 48%
- Local Economy
 - Agriculture, food manufacturing; construction (now declining)
 - High unemployment rate

Study Methods

- Key Informant Interviews – July 2008
 - 1:1 and group interviews (26 individuals)
 - Community Service Agency (CSA) CalWORKs staff, non-gov't services and advocacy organizations
 - Themes: NQI population demographics, gov't and other services, application process including barriers
- NQI Parent Focus Groups – October 2008
 - 2 groups with non-receivers; 1 with receivers (total 32 parents) -- children presumed CalWORKs eligible
 - Parents' knowledge, perceptions, experiences

NQI Caseload

- Poor, both single and two-parent
- Incomes among NQIs generally fall below the poverty line. They “have few resources, little earning power, and few opportunities.” -- Key informant
- Often two or more families live together, typically in crowded, run-down rental housing

Awareness of CalWORKs

- Most focus group participants aware of CalWORKs benefits
- Most understood that citizen children were eligible for assistance
- Several non-receiving participants doubted their children could be eligible if parents were not, given their immigration status
- Overall, much confusion about eligibility and benefit structure

Access Challenges

- Not all forms available in Spanish; lack of bilingual staff, especially for in-depth eligibility interview
- Application long & difficult (14 pages), high literacy level required
- Occasionally rude staff (less so recently)
- Long travel time & office waits & multiple visits: fear of income and job loss from time off work.
- Lack of access to clear, useful, and consistent information and advice, especially about immigration consequences

CaIWORkS Motivations 1

■ Severe economic hardship greatest motivation for using cash aid

- Job loss, unsteady work, work hours cut, unexpected lay-off

- Serious health issue experienced by self, spouse or child led to job dismissal or dropping out of workplace

“All the doors were closing in on me.” -- NQI parent

“I was in a situation such that I could either take that [CaIWORkS] or there’s nothing else.” -- NQI parent

Motivations 2

- Services cut off at home, including gas, cable, telephone and light.
- “The family grew.”
- 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, but it still did not yield enough savings.

Motivations 3

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. -- NQI parent

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

But: Awareness, Desperation, and Fear

At that time I was in a situation of just not having any food. . . . [a friend] saw that the only thing I had in the refrigerator were WIC products, like milk and cheese. . . . And told me, “What point will you get to? . . . 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

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

Misinformation

- 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."

- 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."

- 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 for neglect:
mother's fear of losing child if applied for cash aid

Stigma

- Debate in all three focus groups over whether people who receive cash aid allowed themselves to become dependent on government help and should be perceived as less resourceful, and whether long-term receivers are at fault for their dependency.
- A few people 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.

Insights

- Our research offers a glimpse of the important role of cash assistance in the lives of beneficiary families.
- Many NQI parents 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.
- Lack of use of cash assistance unless circumstances are dire may result in deeper and compounding hardships, with potentially detrimental consequences for children's long-term well-being.
- CalWORKs -- even though used by families in extreme need -- used infrequently and for short periods of time₂₃

Immigration Status & CSA

- Focus group participants' concern about impact on future opportunity to become legal permanent resident – requires demystification
- CSA “could be liable if we provide incorrect information. There are no brochures from the INS.” -- CSA official

What's the Child Welfare Angle?

- Child welfare agencies are tasked to protect children from abuse and neglect.
- Federal and state law require child welfare agencies to make reasonable efforts to keep children at home with their families. Provision of cash and non-cash resources to the family is part of such an effort.
- Child welfare agencies are natural allies in promoting access to assistance for NQI families while keeping families intact.

Role of Public Policy

- ✓ State and local welfare agencies can help reduce gaps in coverage for immigrant children and better respond to the needs of this uniquely vulnerable population.
- ✓ On its own, the existence and severity of the recession calls for prompt action.
- ✓ California budget cuts are very threatening.

CSA Recommendations

- With community partners produce and distribute brochure explaining when NQI families can safely use public benefits and provide contact information to affordable legal assistance.
- Convey message that CalWORKs provides valuable support for children.
- Provide Spanish translation of all materials and adequate staffing for translation services and assistance to those with limited ability to complete forms.
- Monitor wait-times, staff attitudes, and behavior and take needed action.
- Provide written explanations of customers' ineligibility; review for possible need to change CSA outreach and other efforts.

Other Recommendations

- CA to retain child-only benefits when desperately needed by immigrant families in a time of severe economic crisis
- CA to simplify and decentralize CalWORKs application
- CA to minimize frequency of in-person reporting, re-certification, and re-application
- CA to fully fund COLAs not provided since late 1980s
- Federal policies in place to introduce other anti-poverty mechanisms and address unauthorized status of families

Suggested Next Steps

- Stanislaus County child welfare case study: key informant follow-up (CSA Child and Family Services Division)
- Additional county case studies within California and across states
- Ethnographic and survey research activities
 - Assess child and adult well-being among NQI families
 - Develop recommendations for how schools, workforce development programs, and child welfare agencies can help these vulnerable families and affected communities

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