

Welfare Research Reveals Early Challenges of Time Limits

Until now, summarizing welfare research on a particular program component has been a cumbersome task. A new on-line database designed and operated by the Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism simplifies this process, making it easier than ever before to analyze multiple research projects. The database presently includes summaries of 35 research projects which can be searched according to different features of the projects, such as findings, program components evaluated, and outcomes assessed. This article describes how Research Forum staff recently used the database to analyze current research on time limits and develop generalizations across these projects—just one of many analyses possible with the database.

Time limits on receipt of welfare benefits are among the most prominent features of the new federal welfare law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193). The law states that families may not receive benefits for longer than five cumulative years; specific policies on time limits vary by state and even county. As policymakers, practitioners, and researchers attempt to assess recent changes in welfare policies and improve welfare programs, it is critical to understand the effects of these time limits on low-income families and children.

Two important caveats should be kept in mind about research on time limits. First, many projects in the database do not yet have findings or do not have findings specific to time limits. Most projects have been operating for only a few years. At least 11 of the projects are waiver evaluations begun between January 1987 and August 1996

when many states were granted permission or “waivers” to change aspects of their AFDC and Food Stamp program provisions. DHHS required that these changes be evaluated using a random assignment experimental design. Also, many of the available time-limit

findings are interim and concern the process of implementing welfare programs. Nonetheless, important lessons can be learned from these evaluations at this time.

Second, research evaluations are seldom able to isolate and study a single program component, such as time limits, family caps, or financial incentives. When an evaluation includes an impact study with an experimental design, it usually tests the causal effects of a *package* of program components, sometimes referred to as a “black box.” Most evaluations examine time limits in combination with other components specified in state and local welfare policy, as well as in the context of economic, demographic, and social factors unique to the program.

Sixteen projects in the Research Forum database

**How to Use our New
On-line Database**
www.researchforum.org

Greetings from the Director—Barbara Blum



We are pleased to inaugurate this newsletter on the first anniversary of the Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism. While this issue focuses on our on-line database, future editions will describe other Research Forum activities, including research and policy issues related to implementation studies, indicators, and administrative data. We encourage our readers to suggest additional topics of interest.

The database now has a wealth of information about 35 welfare and income security research projects. New projects are always being added—eventually as many as 150 projects will be described. In early 1998, we plan to create a supplementary database containing a broader range of welfare and income security research projects. We also hope to expand the Research Forum database to incorporate general research on child and family well-being.

In order to demonstrate the kinds of analyses possible with the database, we chose to devote this issue to time limits. We have asked: How many database projects examine time limits? How many have interim or final findings? Are there common findings? Obviously, many other questions can be asked about time limits, as well as about other program components such as family caps, fiscal incentives, and school attendance requirements. Our hope is that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners will mine the project summaries in the database and use this research to inform their own work.

examine time limits. Interim findings are available from three of these projects: Delaware's A Better Chance Evaluation, Connecticut's Jobs First: Welfare Reform Evaluation, and Florida's Family Transition Program. Final findings are available for a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) project that covers all 50 states but focuses on Iowa, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin. The chart on the facing page describes these four projects. All project information in the database is based on a protocol reviewed by the project's principal investigators or contact person and updated regularly.

One noteworthy project, which attempts to isolate the effects of time limits and work requirements from other welfare provisions, is the Vermont Welfare Restructuring Project Evaluation by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC). In this evaluation families are assigned to one of three groups: one group experiences all of the state's welfare provisions (e.g. financial incentives, transitional Medicaid) except time limits and work requirements; one group is subject to all provisions; and the third group is assigned to pre-reform ANFC (Vermont's AFDC requirements). An interim report on this evaluation is expected shortly.

Implementing Time Limits is Difficult

Welfare administrators face formidable challenges in implementing time limits, with much of the decision-making burden falling on front-line welfare workers. States must establish systems to track recipients, adequately notify recipients of their status, and provide certain activities and services before benefits can be terminated.

The actual process of implementing time limits varies by location—across states, across welfare offices within a state, and even within a welfare office, across case workers and welfare staff. For example, in Connecticut and Florida, researchers found considerable staff discretion in reviewing cases that reach the time limit. Evaluators in Connecticut noted that staff discretion can lead to inconsistent case reviews and, subsequently, uneven treatment of welfare recipients. Yet, in some circumstances, staff discretion may be beneficial. Researchers in Florida observed that many “one-size-fits-all” decisions do not account for individual conditions or allow for necessary flexibility.

Delaware welfare staff emphasize the need for consistent communication on policy and procedural changes. Researchers note that welfare workers responsible for implementing time limits would benefit from:

- guidance on how to implement program features;
- standardized procedures for basic activities, like case reviews of participants who reach their time limit; and
- clear definitions of program terms, such as “compliant.”

Benefits Often End Before Time Limit

Many welfare recipients find their benefits cut off before their time limit is reached. GAO researchers found that approximately 18,000 families had their benefits terminated

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under waivers through December 1996, but 99 percent of these families had not reached their time limit. These terminations resulted mainly from failure to comply with program rules, particularly work requirements. Welfare recipients cite wanting to stay home with their children and an unwillingness to do community service or work for low wages as reasons for their noncompliance.

Through December 1996, most states rarely used benefit termination. About 72 percent (some 13,000) of the terminations in the GAO study took place in Iowa, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin. The three evaluations previously discussed do not yet have data on benefit termination related to time limits, although MDRC researchers in Florida note that almost all recipients who reached the time limit had their AFDC benefits canceled.

Recipients Know About Time Limits

Research participants receiving welfare benefits usually are aware of program time limits. MDRC researchers in Connecticut and Florida found that recipients were generally aware of major program features, including time limits. In Florida, participants had heard about the time limit prior to anyone actually reaching it. However, a number of Connecticut recipients doubted that time limit rules would be enforced. Researchers warned that such doubts may adversely influence welfare use, contributing to the likelihood that recipients use up their time on assistance at an early age. Officials in Iowa, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin commonly believed their benefit termination provisions had contributed to increases in work activity, job placements, and families moving off welfare more quickly. More in-depth findings on the perceptions of time limits among recipients and staff in Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin are described in *The View from the Field*, an October 1997 report from MDRC's Cross-State Study of Time-Limited Welfare.*

As more findings become available, additional consequences of time limits will be revealed. Areas in need of greater research are also becoming apparent, particularly the issue of family and child well-being once the time limit is exhausted and benefits are terminated.

To obtain further information on projects evaluating time limits, search the Research Forum database on the Forum's web site at www.researchforum.org.

* Not yet included in the Research Forum database.

Database Research Projects with Findings on Time Limits

A BETTER CHANCE EVALUATION

Evaluator	Abt Associates, Inc.
Sponsor	Delaware Department of Health and Human Services
Project duration	September 1995 – March 2000
Sites studied	Dover, Georgetown, New Castle, and Wilmington, Delaware
Time Limit	48-month time limit for most families
Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Impact study (controlled experiment) of 5,051 welfare recipients ▪ Implementation/process study ▪ Descriptive/analytical study
Notes	The A Better Chance evaluation began as a waiver evaluation, but the experimental component (random assignment) was halted after the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.
Publications	<i>The A Better Chance Evaluation: First-Year Evaluation Progress Report</i> (February 1997)*

CONNECTICUT'S JOBS FIRST: WELFARE REFORM EVALUATION PROJECT

Evaluator	Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC)
Sponsor	Connecticut Department of Social Services
Project duration	January 1996 – December 2001
Sites studied	Manchester and New Haven, Connecticut
Time Limit	21-month time limit (with some exemptions and extensions)
Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Impact study (controlled experiment) of 6,090 welfare applicants and recipients ▪ Cost-benefit study ▪ Implementation study
Notes	The Jobs First evaluation began as a waiver evaluation.
Publications	<i>Early Data on the Implementation of Connecticut's Jobs First Program</i> (December 1997)*

FLORIDA'S FAMILY TRANSITION PROGRAM

Evaluator	Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC)
Sponsor	Florida Department of Children and Families
Project duration	February 1994 – December 1999
Sites studied	Escambia County (Pensacola), Florida
Time Limit	24 months in any 60-month period (for most recipients) or 36 months in any 72-month period (for particularly disadvantaged recipients)
Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Impact study (controlled experiment) of 5,430 welfare applicants and recipients ▪ Cost-benefit study ▪ Implementation study
Notes	The Family Transition Program evaluation began as a waiver evaluation.
Publications	<i>The Family Transition Program: Implementation and Early Impacts of Florida's Initial Time-Limited Welfare Program</i> (May 1997)*

WELFARE REFORM: STATES' EARLY EXPERIENCES WITH BENEFIT TERMINATION

Evaluator	U.S. General Accounting Office, Health, Education, and Human Services Division
Sponsor	U.S. Senate Finance Committee
Project duration	April 1996 – April 1997
Sites studied	States that implemented waivers prior to the August 1996 federal reforms, with a focus on Iowa, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin
Time Limit	Varies by state
Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Descriptive/analytic study
Notes	This project describes: (1) those families whose benefits have been terminated under waivers; (2) federal or state benefits that are available and being received after termination; and (3) states' experiences in implementing these provisions.
Publications	<i>Welfare Reform: States' Early Experiences with Benefit Termination</i> (May 1997)*

* For further information, project summaries in the Research Forum database include an Internet link to the evaluating organization.

RESEARCH FORUM ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND THE NEW FEDERALISM

The Research Forum, an initiative of the National Center for Children in Poverty, hosted at Columbia School of Public Health, encourages collaborative research and informed policy on welfare reform and vulnerable populations. The Forum's ultimate goal is to identify and promote strategies that protect and enhance the well-being of poor children and their families.

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