

Operating within the Rules: Welfare Recipients' Experiences with Sanctions and Case Closings

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This article examines the experiences of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families recipients with sanctions and administrative case closings, as reported by respondents in a survey of families in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. Among those who said that their welfare benefits had been reduced or eliminated for noncompliance with the rules, the most common reasons provided were missing an appointment or not filing paperwork. In comparison with other families that had received welfare in the previous 2 years, families that were penalized were more disadvantaged in a number of respects, including lower education and poorer health.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) altered the welfare system in important ways. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which re-

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placed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), gives states a fixed block grant, ends the entitlement of families to welfare benefits, and imposes a 5-year limit on the use of federal funds to provide a family with assistance. Congress intended these restrictions to reduce dependence on government by changing the behavior of welfare recipients along several dimensions, including work, marriage, and childbearing. Yet although caseloads have dropped sharply, relatively few families reached their limits during the first 5 years after PRWORA was enacted (Pavetti and Bloom 2001). Time limits, though, are not the only enforcement mechanism available under PRWORA. According to one estimate, during the first several years of the program, more families had their TANF benefits reduced or eliminated because the welfare office determined that they were not following the rules of the program than had lost benefits as a result of time limits (Goldberg and Schott 2000).

If an adult in a family receiving assistance refuses to engage in required work, states have the authority to reduce the amount of assistance payable to the family, a procedure known as a partial sanction, or to terminate the amount of assistance, a procedure known as a full-family sanction (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000). Sixteen states have chosen to impose only partial sanctions; the rest impose full sanctions, usually after first imposing a partial sanction. States also have the option to impose partial or full sanctions on individuals who fail to cooperate with efforts to establish paternity or obtain child support. In addition, states may impose partial sanctions for other types of noncompliance, such as failure to keep children inoculated against certain illnesses or to maintain children's attendance in school. The U.S. General Accounting Office estimated in 2000 that, in an average month, five times as many families experienced partial sanctions as experienced full sanctions (U.S. General Accounting Office 2000*b*). In the study described in this article, three times as many people report partial sanction as report a full loss of benefits.

Imposing a full-family sanction is not the only way that a state can terminate benefits. States have long had the authority to close cases when recipients do not follow administrative regulations while enrolled in the program. These administrative case closings typically follow procedural violations such as failing to turn in required forms or to meet periodically with caseworkers to determine continuing eligibility for benefits. Administrative case closings differ from case closings due to a change in eligibility status, such as an increase in a recipient's income, a change in marital status, or a youngest child reaching age 18.

Although many researchers have studied administrative case closings from the standpoint of the bureaucracy, fewer have studied the topic from the standpoint of the recipient, for whom administrative case closings and full-family sanctions can be difficult to distinguish. To be sure, there are some potential tangible differences. For example, individuals

generally can reapply for benefits immediately if their case is closed for procedural reasons, whereas individuals who are sanctioned may be unable to reapply for a fixed period of time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000). Yet the rules in the cities we studied allow many sanctioned individuals to reapply as soon as they come into compliance, thus blurring the line between case closings and sanctions.¹ Therefore, full-family sanctions and administrative case closings, both of which terminate TANF benefits for not following rules, can appear very similar to families.

In this article, we provide information on case closings for noncompliance from the point of view of the recipients. In doing so, we consider sanctions and administrative case closings jointly. We asked recipients whether their benefits had been reduced or eliminated because the welfare office said they had not followed the rules. It is possible that some recipients do not correctly understand why they have lost benefits, in part because regulations can be obscure and their implementation difficult to understand. But we argue that a study based on recipients' perceptions of their situations can provide valuable information on their actions and the nature of their difficulties with the TANF system. Drawing on a sample of families from low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio, we present the most common reasons families reported for losing all or part of their benefits, the characteristics of these families, and their experiences after losing benefits.

Background

Between 1965 and 1970 the AFDC rolls more than doubled and the ensuing administrative difficulties led to an overhaul of state reporting requirements by Congress, resulting in a more formal, rule-bound system that emphasized strict adherence to rules and caseload reduction (Brodkin 1986). The emphasis on decreasing errors and streamlining procedures placed the onus on clients to verify their eligibility and allowed case managers increased authority to penalize them for noncompliance (Handler and Hasenfeld 1991). Observers claimed that case managers sometimes became street-level bureaucrats, overseeing the implementation of rules meant to increase client accountability (Lipsky 1984; Bane and Ellwood 1994; Brodkin 1997). Some contended that caseworkers, under pressure to reduce error rates and enforce compliance, became more concerned with satisfying procedural requirements than with helping clients traverse a system that was becoming increasingly bureaucratic (Brodkin 1986).

Welfare reform strategies during this period employed varying degrees of coercion and persuasion. Programs like the Work Incentive Program (WIN) of 1967 and WIN II of 1971, which were partly coercive in their approach to client conformity, also attempted to encourage client par-

ticipation by providing incentives such as income disregards for eligible recipients. Both programs allowed sanctions for noncompliance, yet these more punitive measures were seldom used (Handler and Hasenfeld 1991, 1997). Similarly, when Congress passed the Family Support Act of 1988 and created the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program, the use of sanctions was not widespread, although strict requirements were placed on clients enrolled in the program. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic atmosphere in welfare offices in the decades leading up to PRWORA meant that clients were often unable to distinguish among the various procedural or administrative guidelines case managers could refer to when making decisions about eligibility or compliance.

Evelyn Brodtkin's (1986) case studies of AFDC administrative reforms in Massachusetts in the early 1980s demonstrate the inherent contradictions in a system that became increasingly stringent and reliant on regulatory guidelines and yet provided case managers and supervisors with much individual discretion. Frontline workers had the responsibility to interpret the rules according to the complicated and unique circumstances of families' lives. Attempts to resolve ambiguities in a family's application, redetermination, or maintenance of welfare status involved an array of possible resolutions, driven in large part by official guidelines, the welfare office's interpretation of those rules, and the interplay between the caseworker and his or her supervisor and between caseworker and client. Clients were often left confused about official determinations of their cases, in part, because decision makers now had a wider array of options available to them to make such rulings. Case managers, for their part, were also caught in a difficult quandary. At times, they had to choose between what was best for their clients and what was the most appropriate course of action according to the regulations (Brodtkin 1986).

The emphasis on work requirements and caseload reduction increased again with the passage of PRWORA. In the early 1990s, the Department of Health and Human Services began to waive some of the federal welfare rules in order to allow states to try new approaches. Some state officials and policy makers were concerned that partial sanctions were not severe enough to encourage families to comply with work requirements, and about 30 states received waivers to implement full-family sanctions. From mid-1993 through 1996, about 18,000 families' benefits were terminated for failure to comply with program requirements (Pavetti et al. 1997).

In addition, under the waiver process, many states began to experiment with reducing or eliminating benefits for other reasons. In part, the reasons involved parental responsibility: under some waivers, AFDC recipients could be sanctioned if they failed to get their children immunized against childhood diseases or to take them to regular medical checkups or if their children did not attend school regularly. States also

initiated sanctions if mothers did not provide adequate information about fathers to child support enforcement agencies, although these sanctions were allowed previously and did not require a waiver. Sanctions policies thus evolved as a way to influence the behavior of welfare recipients in several domains.

Under PRWORA, states were required to withhold part of a family's grant—that is, to impose at least a partial sanction—if the adult recipient did not comply with work requirements or failed to cooperate with child support enforcement. Under certain circumstances, states were also required to withhold part of a family's Food Stamps benefit and, optionally, Medicaid coverage for some adults. Moreover, for the first time in federal welfare legislation, states were allowed to impose full-family sanctions on adults in single-parent families for failure to cooperate with work activities. In addition, states were allowed to implement partial or full-family sanctions and to withhold Food Stamps and Medicaid (subject to some limitations) for purposes other than work enforcement.

A report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (2000*b*) estimates that in 1998 about 5 percent of the total average monthly TANF caseload was sanctioned, with substantial variations from state to state. Eighty-three percent were partial sanctions, and 17 percent were full-family sanctions. The numbers in the report reflect full sanctions only in the month the sanction begins, thus underestimating the average number of families under full sanctions each month (U.S. General Accounting Office 2000*a*). In a survey of welfare recipients in an urban Michigan county, 18 percent of the women who received cash welfare benefits said that their benefits were reduced or stopped during the previous year because their welfare worker said they had not followed the rules (Kalil and Seefeldt, in press). As in the study we report, this percentage appears to combine sanctions and administrative case closings.

Few studies provide demographic descriptions of sanctioned cases. But some evidence suggests that many TANF clients who are sanctioned have multiple barriers to self-sufficiency. In their review of other studies, LaDonna Pavetti and Dan Bloom (2001) conclude that although sanctioned families are heterogeneous, hard-to-employ families (e.g., those without GEDs or high school diplomas or those who are long-term welfare recipients) are overrepresented in the sanctioned group. The authors also conclude that often families who are sanctioned experience challenges such as domestic violence, physical and mental health problems, drug or alcohol dependency, or transportation problems that may make it difficult for them to comply with program requirements. These challenges may also extend their time on welfare. Similarly, Heidi Goldberg and Liz Schott (2000), citing many state studies, conclude that sanctioned families, compared with other welfare families, have less education, less work experience, a greater incidence of domestic violence, more disabilities, and more mental and physical health problems

and lack support services such as transportation and child care. Ariel Kalil and Kristin Seefeldt (in press) report that in one Michigan county, participants whose benefits were reduced or eliminated were likely to be less educated and younger, but there were no significant differences in race, marital status, or length of time on welfare. The U.S. General Accounting Office (2000*b*) report also notes that sanctioned participants in six states were less educated or faced more barriers to work, such as transportation or child care difficulties or health problems. The authors of some of the studies speculate that low education may limit the ability to understand and comply with complex rules and cause some families to be sanctioned.

Since the main purpose of strengthening the sanctions mechanism in PRWORA was to enforce strict work requirements, it is often assumed that failure to work is the main reason for their imposition. Indeed, reports based on administrative data suggest as much. For example, a U.S. General Accounting Office (2000*b*) report concludes from state studies that 61 percent of sanctions were imposed for noncompliance with work responsibilities, 15 percent for failure to verify immunizations and to ensure school attendance, and 11 percent for failure to cooperate with child support enforcement agencies.²

Some studies report that welfare leavers who are sanctioned do not fare as well as those who leave welfare for other reasons. Pavetti and Bloom's (2001) review of a number of leaver studies provides a mixed picture, but they report that many of the families that left welfare in response to sanctions or time limits later had trouble making ends meet and sometimes had insufficient food. However, it is unclear whether sanctioned and time-limited families were worse off than those who left welfare for other reasons. A U.S. General Accounting Office (2000*b*) report concludes that 41 percent of sanctioned adults worked after they left TANF, compared with 68 percent of adults who left welfare for other reasons. Goldberg and Schott (2000) also conclude that sanctioned leavers were less likely to become employed and that those who did become employed had lower earnings than those who left for other reasons. Kalil and Seefeldt's multivariate analysis, which attempts to control for individual differences, suggests that having benefits reduced or eliminated increased the likelihood of encountering economic hardship (Kalil and Seefeldt, in press).

In sum, sanctions and administrative case closings are bureaucratic mechanisms for enforcing compliance with welfare rules and for furthering the goals of welfare policy. Use of the former mechanism has increased since PRWORA, and the latter mechanism has remained common. From a client's perspective, the two mechanisms look almost indistinguishable. A number of studies of sanctions have been carried out using administrative data from states or localities, sometimes supple-

mented by interviews with welfare administrators and caseworkers. Although these studies can provide estimates of the number of families involved, they often lack information on the experiences of the families. A detailed analysis of the characteristics and experiences of families that say they had their benefits reduced or eliminated can help us to better understand the role that penalties for noncompliance play under TANF.

The Three-City Study

The data used in this article come from a study of low-income families in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. For one component of the study, the researchers conducted a household-based, random-sample survey of children and their caregivers in low-income neighborhoods.³ In households with a child age 0–4 or age 10–14, with a female primary caregiver, and with an income below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, interviewers randomly selected one child and conducted in-person interviews with that child's primary caregiver (a mother in over 90 percent of the cases) and, in the case of 10- to 14-year-olds, the child. Interviews were conducted between March and November of 1999 with 2,402 families, including an oversample of TANF-receiving families. The response rate was 74 percent. Thirty-seven percent of the families were receiving TANF at the time of the interview, and an additional 20 percent had received TANF in the 2 years prior to the interview.⁴ All tables and figures reported in this article are based on the random-sample survey.⁵

Of the three states in the study, Massachusetts and Illinois both impose full-family sanctions but implement them in a graduated manner. In Illinois, the initial violation results in a 50 percent reduction of the family's TANF benefit, and subsequent failure to comply for 3 months can result in a full-family sanction. In Massachusetts, the initial violation results in the loss of the adult portion of the family's TANF grant. Subsequent failure to comply with work requirements for 1 month can result in a full-family sanction. So even in the two states in the study that allow full-family sanctions, all noncompliant families receive partial sanctions first. Texas does not impose full-family sanctions. In all three states, noncompliance with work requirements can also result in partial or full reduction in Food Stamps benefits. In these states, as is the case nationwide (Lurie 2001), there appears to be substantial variation at the level of the local welfare office and the caseworker in how frequently sanctions are invoked.

As for administrative case closings, the welfare agencies in all three states have the authority to eliminate families' benefits by closing their cases if the recipients fail to follow a variety of requirements. These include failure to keep an appointment or attend a meeting with a caseworker and failure to produce verification of eligibility for continued

benefits. Welfare reform does not appear to have lessened the amount of time that caseworkers must devote to collecting and verifying documents (Lurie 2001).

This article focuses on the 1,262 caregivers in the 1999 survey who said they had received TANF at some point in the previous 2 years. In the survey, interviewers asked every caregiver who had left TANF in the previous 2 years (even those who were back on the rolls at the time of the interview) the following question about the most recent time they left: “Did you go off welfare at that time because the welfare office said you weren’t following the rules or was there some other reason?”⁶ If the respondent said she left for “some other reason” or if she had received TANF continuously for the previous 2 years, she was asked: “Did the welfare office in [state] reduce your benefits at some point in the past 2 years because they said you were not following the rules?” The answers to these questions were used to calculate the frequency of full loss of benefits (those who said they went off welfare because the welfare office said they were not following the rules) and partial loss of benefits (those who said they had their benefits reduced because the welfare office said they were not following the rules). A partial loss of benefits could only have reflected a partial sanction. A full loss of benefits could have been the result of a sanction or a case closing. The survey did not directly ask which of the two had occurred because it was the investigators’ impression that the distinction is often unclear to the recipients who are affected. Nevertheless, when we examined responses to a follow-up question—“Which rules did the welfare office say you were not following?”—we excluded from our measure any recipients who said that their benefits were reduced or eliminated because they got a job, got married, or their income rose (i.e., those whose eligibility status changed).⁷ Let us caution that the study did not request access to recipients’ administrative records. There may be other recipients in the survey who did not disclose that they had lost benefits as a result of sanctions or case closings or who were not aware that they had lost benefits. And there may be others who mistakenly thought that they were sanctioned.

Reasons for Losing Benefits

Taking all three cities together, we find that 13 percent of caregivers who reported receiving TANF at some point in the previous 2 years also reported experiencing a partial loss of benefits, and another 4 percent reported experiencing a full loss of benefits, because the welfare office said they were not following the rules.⁸ Figure 1 displays the results separately for each city. In all three cities, a reported partial loss of benefits was more common than a full loss of benefits. Combining both partial and full losses, the percentage reporting a loss over the previous

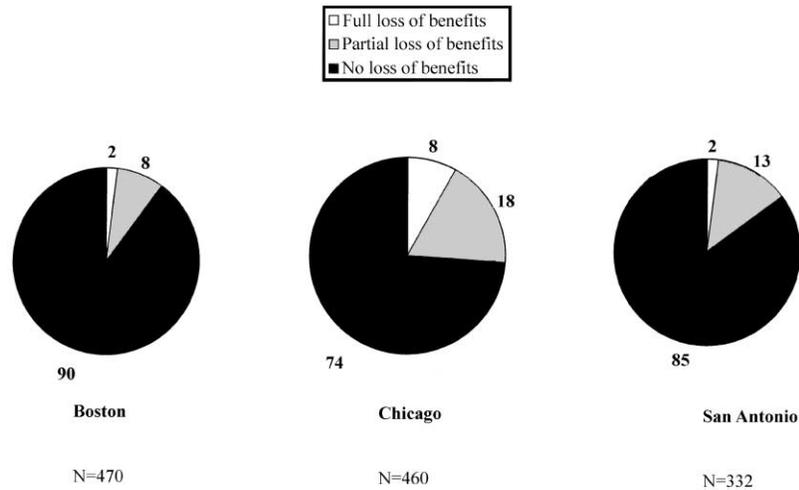
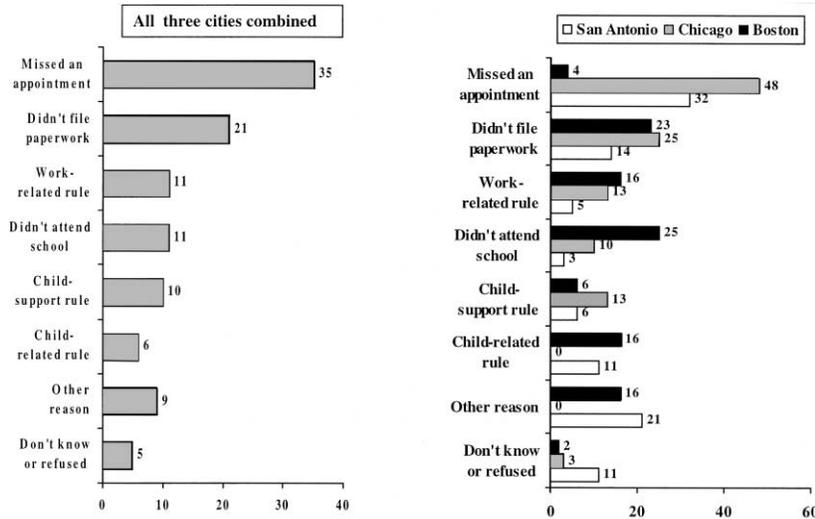


FIG. 1.—Percentage of all individuals who have received welfare in the past 2 years who reported a loss of benefits because the welfare office said they were not following the rules, by city.

2 years was lowest in Boston (10 percent), higher in San Antonio (15 percent), and highest in Chicago (26 percent).

For everyone who reported a partial or full loss of benefits because they were told they were not following the rules, we asked, “Which rules did the welfare office say you were not following?” Figure 2 shows the responses for all three cities together and for each separately. The categories in the chart were not read to the individuals but rather appeared on the interviewer’s laptop computer screen (and in some instances were later combined or recoded by the authors of this report). If an individual gave a reason that did not fit a preassigned category, the interviewer was instructed to enter the response verbatim on the computer. We subsequently examined these responses and recategorized individuals whenever appropriate. (As noted above, we also excluded responses that were clearly about loss of eligibility.) The percentages in figure 2 sum to slightly more than 100 percent because individuals were allowed to state more than one reason, but less than one in 10 did so.

Missed appointment or paperwork problem.—The two largest categories in figure 2 are “missed an appointment” and “didn’t file paperwork.” The survey interviewers did not inquire further about what type of appointment was missed or what kind of paperwork was not filed. Boston had the lowest percentage of caregivers in the survey who said missing an appointment was the reason their benefits were reduced or eliminated.⁹ The highest percentage occurred in Chicago (see fig. 2). Interviews with key informants and families in Chicago suggest that efforts to check the



Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because a small number of individuals gave more than one answer

FIG. 2.—Individuals' reports on which rules the welfare office said they were not following.

continued eligibility of welfare recipients may be the reason for the higher reports of missing a meeting. In 1999, for example, while the survey was underway, some Chicago welfare offices sent redetermination letters to large numbers of recipients in their districts, requiring them all to report to the office on the same day. Those who did not show up had their cases closed. However, the cases could be reopened retroactively if the recipient came to the office within 10 days. Consequently, many of the individuals had their benefits reinstated. Indeed, 62 percent of the Chicago survey respondents in the "missed an appointment" category had their benefits reinstated. Missing an appointment also was the most common reason for losing some or all benefits in San Antonio.

Other reasons.—All of the other categories in figure 2 were reported less often. In 11 percent of the cases, a recipient reported either refusing to work or not showing up for work. These are the adults whose experiences most closely match the common understanding of why sanctions are imposed. They constitute about one-ninth of all the cases reporting partial or full loss of benefits due to rules violations in the survey.

The category "didn't attend school" refers, in part, to rules that require minors who have not finished high school to attend school or GED classes; about one-half of the cases in Boston, where the "didn't attend school" category was highest, involved women age 20 or younger.

The other half of the “didn’t attend school” cases in Boston and most of the small number of cases in the other two cities involved adults; they may have agreed (or been required) to attend English as a second language or job-training classes as part of their TANF responsibilities.

The “child support rules” category refers to the requirement that TANF recipients cooperate with child support enforcement efforts by providing information about the fathers of their children. If they fail to do so, they are subject to sanctions. This type of sanction was present even prior to PRWORA.

The “child-related rules” refer to responsibilities parents must fulfill or else face sanctions. In nearly all cases in the study, these were partial sanctions. Parents were required to get their children immunized against childhood diseases and to have regular medical checkups. They also were held responsible if their children did not attend school regularly. These rules seemed to have an effect on some parents. A San Antonio mother in the ethnography said that it was well known that welfare and Food Stamps benefits would be reduced “if you don’t take them to their checkups, or they’re not updated with their shots.”

The remaining cases fall into the “other” and “don’t know/refused” categories. The former is an amalgam of verbatim responses that we could not understand or could not place in any of the categories. The “don’t know/refused” category is particularly high in San Antonio.

Who Has Benefits Reduced or Cut Off?

We examine which characteristics seem to best predict the likelihood that women would have their TANF benefits reduced or eliminated for noncompliance. Our method is a logistic regression in which the dependent variable is the log-odds of having benefits reduced or eliminated among all caregivers who received TANF in the previous 2 years. The independent variables are characteristics that the study or previous studies suggested might be predictive. They are listed in table 1. Some require explanation:

Poor health: A variable scored one for responses of “fair” or “poor” and zero for responses of “good,” “very good,” or “excellent,” to the question, “In general, how is your health?”

Brief Symptom Inventory: An 18-item scale of anxiety, depression, and somatization, with a higher score indicating more symptoms.¹⁰

Domestic interference: A scale composed of the number of affirmative responses to four questions asking whether someone in a romantic relationship had interfered with the respondent’s employment, training, or schooling.¹¹

Moderate domestic violence: A scale composed of the number of affirmative responses to four questions asking whether someone in a ro-

Table 1

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR ALL VARIABLES USED IN MODELS, FOR ALL WOMEN WHO HAD BEEN ON TANF DURING THE PREVIOUS 2 YEARS ($N = 1,122$)

	Mean	Standard
Race/ethnicity:		
African American	.490	.496
Hispanic	.479	.496
White (omitted category)	.032	.173
City:		
Boston	.325	.465
Chicago	.331	.467
San Antonio (omitted category)	.344	.471
Completed high school or GED	.624	.480
Age	31.054	9.551
Marital status:		
Married	.177	.378
Cohabiting	.060	.235
Neither married nor cohabiting (omitted category)	.763	.422
Number of minors in household	3.357	1.730
Age of youngest child (in years)	3.636	3.828
Native English speaker (yes = 1)	.756	.426
Months on welfare in past 2 years	18.613	7.969
Months worked in past 2 years	7.078	8.367
Poor health	.266	.438
Brief Symptom Inventory	1.669	1.134
Domestic interference	.134	.277
Moderate domestic violence	.484	.401
Extreme domestic violence	.205	.323
Has phone at home (yes = 1)	.798	.399
Household owns car (yes = 1)	.340	.470
Used marijuana in past 12 months (yes = 1)	.158	.362
Used hard drugs in past 12 months	.031	.171
Neighborhood problems	21.049	6.128

NOTE.—The numbers presented in this table are weighted.

romantic relationship had ever “threatened to hit you,” “thrown something at you,” “pushed, grabbed, or shoved you,” or “slapped, kicked, bit or punched you.”¹²

Extreme domestic violence: A scale composed of the number of affirmative responses to four questions asking whether someone in a romantic relationship had ever “beaten you,” “choked or burned you,” “used a weapon or threatened to use a weapon on you,” or “forced you into any sexual activity against your will.”¹³

Neighborhood problems: A scale composed of 11 items measuring common problems.¹⁴

Our multivariate analysis cannot establish cause and effect. Some correlates of losing benefits, such as lower household income, might precede a penalty or result from it. Indeed, we suspect that many of the characteristics of penalized families preceded the imposition of the penalties. Our intent is not to propose a causal model but rather to identify

Table 2

ODDS OF HAVING BENEFITS REDUCED OR ELIMINATED FOR NONCOMPLIANCE, FOR ALL WOMEN WHO HAD BEEN ON TANF DURING THE PREVIOUS 2 YEARS ($N = 1,122$)

	e^{β}
Demographic characteristics:	
African American	2.452
Hispanic	1.792
Chicago	1.337
San Antonio	1.395
Completed high school or GED	.657*
Age	.971*
Married	1.029
Cohabiting	.661
Number of minors in household	1.049
Age of youngest child	1.012
Native English speaker	1.680
Work/welfare variables:	
Months on welfare in past 2 years	.991
Months worked in past 2 years	.988
Poor health	1.995**
Substantive variables of interest:	
Brief Symptom Inventory	.873
Domestic interference	3.654**
Moderate domestic violence	.962
Extreme domestic violence	.526
Has phone at home	.660*
Household owns car	.520**
Used marijuana in past 12 months	1.755*
Used hard drugs in past 12 months	1.424
Neighborhood problems	1.026

NOTE.—Coefficients are reported in exponentiated (e^{β}) form.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

a set of characteristics that are typical of the kinds of families that have their benefits reduced or eliminated.

The results of the logistic regression are presented in table 2. Estimated coefficients are presented in exponentiated form as odds ratios. For example, the first coefficient in the table suggests that, controlling for all the other factors in the model, African Americans were 2.45 times as likely to have their benefits reduced for noncompliance as the reference group, non-Hispanic whites. But this difference is not statistically significant, in part due to the small number of non-Hispanic whites in the sample.

Several coefficients were statistically significant: Those who said they were sanctioned or had their cases closed were less likely to have completed high school or to have obtained a GED and were younger, on average.¹⁵ They were also more likely to report being in “fair” or “poor” health, rather than “good,” “very good,” or “excellent” health. In addition, penalized families scored higher on the scale measuring whether

a romantic partner had interfered with their employment, training, or schooling. They also were more likely to report using marijuana during the previous 12 months, although there was no significant difference in use of hard drugs. They were less likely to say that they had a working telephone at home that they can use and less likely to say that anyone in their household owned a car, van, or truck. Finally, penalized families scored marginally ($p < .10$) higher on the neighborhood problems scale.

These findings imply that families that were sanctioned or had their cases closed for procedural reasons were more vulnerable in many respects than other families. Their health tended to be worse, they had lower levels of education, and they tended to have more children to care for in their households. They were more likely to report that a romantic partner interfered with their attempts to work or to attend school. They were less likely to have a telephone; it is, of course, harder for caseworkers and clients to keep in touch when the clients do not have telephones. This communication problem could have contributed to the high percentage of individuals who reported losing benefits as a result of missed appointments. Their lower likelihood of owning an automobile may have made it more difficult for them to find a job or to travel to work.

Coping with Benefit Reductions

In the survey, we asked adults who reported a partial or full loss of benefits for not following the rules whether they had tried to get their benefits reinstated, whether these efforts were successful, and what they did to cope with the loss of income. About two-thirds said that they had tried to get their benefits back. (Among those who tried, about half said that they had started following the rules again, and the other half reported appealing the decision, reapplying, showing proof of good cause, or other strategies.) About half of all respondents who received a full or partial sanction said that they had been able to get their benefits back.¹⁶

Figure 3 shows the response to a question that was asked of caregivers who reported a partial or full loss of benefits without complete restoration of these benefits: "What did you do to get by when the benefits stopped/after the benefits were cut?" The most common responses (more than one answer was allowed) was "got a job," followed by "cut back on necessities" and "got money from friends and family." Modest numbers reported cutting back on extras, stopping or delaying paying bills, getting more child support from fathers, or obtaining benefits from another program. Only 2 percent mentioned getting help from charity. Less than 1 percent reported obtaining cheaper housing or moving in with others, placing children in someone else's care, or going to a homeless shelter. It appears that, in addition to getting a job, families

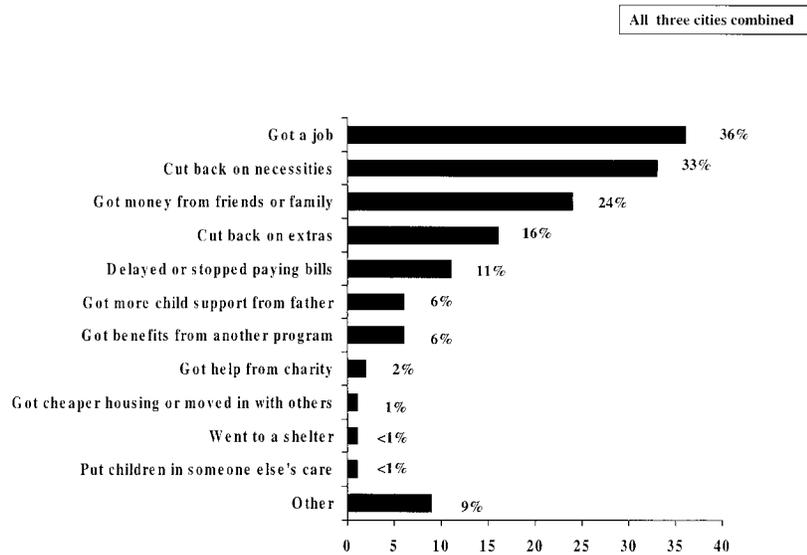


FIG. 3.—What individuals did to get by when benefits were stopped or reduced $N = 108$ respondents who said they did not get benefits completely restored.

that lose benefits tend to cut spending and rely mainly on friends and kin for support.

Conclusion

In a sample of children and their caregivers in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio who had received TANF in the 2 years prior to a 1999 interview, 17 percent of the caregivers said that their benefits were reduced (13 percent) or eliminated (4 percent) because the welfare office said they were not following the rules. There were differences among the three cities in the percentage of caregivers who said that their benefits were reduced or eliminated. But these city-to-city variations did not correspond to differences in policies for sanctions and procedural case closings that could be easily measured. For example, Massachusetts and Illinois allow full sanctions to be imposed and Texas does not. Yet the percentage of people who reported penalties in Boston (10 percent) was more similar to San Antonio (15 percent) than to Chicago (26 percent). And the percentages of penalized recipients who said they had their benefits withheld for missing meetings differed greatly in Boston (4 percent) and Chicago (48 percent).

According to the recipients, sanctions and procedural case closings were imposed for a wide range of reasons. Few were imposed because someone directly refused to work or did not show up for a work-related

activity. Instead, the most common reasons were bureaucratic: missing a meeting or failing to produce required forms or documents. Some of these reasons were related to failure to provide verification of work, but others were not. Benefit reductions were also imposed for failure to provide enough information about fathers to the child support enforcement system and for many behavioral reasons, such as children's poor school attendance, lack of immunizations, or failure to get children regular medical checkups.

Our data are not sufficient to judge the effectiveness of sanctions and case closings in obtaining compliance with program rules. But we find that sanctions and procedural case closings appeared to ensnare families that were experiencing hardships and possibly to impose more hardships on some of them. Each of the many ways that rules can be violated requires its own verification system and has its own paper trail. For low-income individuals with limited education, daily lives filled with personal turmoil, and employment and family responsibilities to balance, meeting all of these demands may be more than many can handle. Being able to turn in forms on time or to follow up with doctors' offices or employers' personnel offices can be a feat in itself. It requires keeping up with the mail; noticing and adhering to deadlines; and reading, interpreting, and responding to questions—all of this by mothers who may have complex and challenging daily lives. Individuals whose benefits were reduced or cut off tended to have poorer health. They were more likely to report that a romantic partner interfered with their attempts to work or go to school. They were less likely to have a telephone or to own an automobile and were marginally more likely to live in lower-quality neighborhoods.

Our findings, if confirmed by other studies of PRWORA, suggest that welfare agencies may wish to adjust sanctions and case closing procedures to the higher level of disadvantage among many of the affected families and to their difficulties in complying with program rules. In some jurisdictions, for example, social service personnel meet with family members after noncompliance but before a penalty is imposed. They determine whether the family understands what actions are needed to comply, assess what problems the family faces in complying, and provide services to help them comply. In other jurisdictions, social service personnel meet with families after a penalty has been imposed to help them return to compliance (Goldberg and Schott 2000). Throughout this process, it would be useful to identify families' barriers to self-sufficiency and to assist them in making the transition from welfare to steady employment. For some families penalized for noncompliance, steady employment may not be feasible, and exemptions from time limits may be needed.

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Notes

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1. In Massachusetts, all sanctioned cases can be reinstated as soon as the individual comes into compliance. In Illinois, the first instance of sanctioning reduces benefits that can be reinstated immediately, although the second instance must remain in force for 3 months. In Texas a work-related sanction must remain in force for 1 month for the first violation, 3 months for the second violation, or 6 months for subsequent violations; child-support-related sanctions may be reinstated immediately on compliance. Still, safeguards that apply to sanctions in many states, such as notifying recipients in writing of the impending loss of benefits and providing them an opportunity to demonstrate reasonable cause for noncompliance, do not always apply to case closings.

2. Unfortunately, the Michigan survey did not ask why sanctions were imposed on its subjects.

3. Ninety-three percent of the block groups we selected for our sample covered areas with poverty rates of 20 percent or more.

4. These are unweighted percentages. All other statistics in this report use weights that adjust the statistics to be representative of all the families in the areas of the cities from which we drew our sample. The cities are given equal weight. In weighted terms, 32 percent of the sample was receiving TANF at the time of the interview, and another 16 percent had received TANF in the previous 2 years. The difference between the unweighted and weighted percentages on TANF occurred because we intentionally oversampled families that were likely to be receiving TANF.

5. The 2.5 hour interview with the caregiver covered a wide range of topics. Questions concerning several of the most sensitive topics—domestic violence, work-related domestic harassment, substance use, depression, and anxiety—were asked using the audio computer-assisted self-interview method. Respondents were given a laptop computer and provided with earphones. They saw and heard the questions; no one else in the room could see or hear. They responded to questions by pressing number keys on the computer, as instructed by the program. Studies suggest that this method increases the reporting of sensitive behavior in surveys (Turner et al. 1998).

6. If the respondent indicated that another term such as “public aid” was used to refer to welfare, we substituted that term.

7. It is possible that some recipients whose eligibility changed exited TANF in anticipation of sanctions or administrative case closings.

8. All figures that we report for the three cities combined correspond to average values across the three cities. For example, the 17 percent total for partial and full loss of benefits is an average of 10 percent (Boston), 15 percent (San Antonio), and 26 percent (Chicago).

9. This is not to say that such violations never happen; legal services experts in Boston have told us that they have handled appeals in many such cases. However, there may be some procedural safeguards in Boston that reduce the number of benefit reductions and terminations for missing an appointment.

10. The scale is copyrighted (Derogatis 2000). For each item, response choices range from “not at all” (1) to “extremely” (5). To address skewness in the raw scores, transformed variables were created by adding one to the raw score and taking the natural logarithm. The scale has an alpha reliability of .91 in our sample.

11. The items all begin with the phrase “Has anyone you have been in a romantic relationship with ever . . .” The selections were as follows: “interfered with your attempts to go to work, training or school?”; “harassed you at work, training, or school?”; “caused you to miss work, school, or training because of their behavior?”; and “caused you to lose a job because of their behavior?” Respondents received one point for each affirmative answer, and the score was created by taking the mean. The alpha reliability is .83.

12. The items are prefaced by the phrase “Now, think about all of the romantic relationships you have had in your life.” Each item is prefaced by, “Has anyone you have been in a romantic relationship with ever . . .” Square root transformations of the raw scores are used to correct for skewness of the data. Principal components analysis with promax rotation was performed to ascertain the construct. A mean total composite value was calculated for each individual. The alpha reliability is .85.

13. The scale construction is identical to that for moderate domestic violence. (See n. 12 above.) The alpha reliability is .84.

14. The sequence is prefaced by the statement “For the next questions, please tell me

how much of a problem each of the following is in your neighborhood." The response categories are "not a problem," "somewhat of a problem," and "a big problem." The respondent's answers are added up across the 11 items. The items are "high unemployment," "abandoned houses," "burglaries and thefts," "assaults and muggings," "gangs," "drug dealing in the open," "unsupervised children," "teenage pregnancy," "unsafe streets during the day," "police not being available," and "children that you don't want your [child/children] to associate with." The alpha reliability is .91.

15. Odds ratios of less than 1.0 imply that when the value of a variable increases, the likelihood of having benefits reduced or eliminated decreases.

16. The percentage is only slightly lower (44 percent vs. 47 percent) when the large number of Chicago families who reported being sanctioned for missing an appointment are excluded.

