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Restoring Work by Poor Fathers

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Abstract

Low-skilled men, especially minorities, typically work at low levels and provide little support for their children. Conservatives blame this on government willingness to support families, which frees the fathers from responsibility, while liberals say that men are denied work by racial bias or the economy—either a lack of jobs or low wages, which depress the incentive to work. The evidence for all these theories is weak. Thus, changing program benefits or incentives is unlikely to solve the men's work problem. More promising is the idea of linking assistance with administrative requirements to work, as was done in welfare reform. Few nonworking men receive welfare, but many owe child support. The child support system has begun to develop mandatory work programs to which nonpaying fathers can be assigned if they fail to work and pay their judgments. Evaluations show that such programs can help raise work levels if well implemented. Texas's Noncustodial Parents Choices (NCP Choices) program shows the potential to build work enforcement into the child support system. We recommend that more states develop programs like NCP Choices. The federal government should support that effort by conducting more evaluations and by allowing states to receive federal matching funds for child support work programs, like other enforcement expenses of the child support system.

Men Are Working Less, Women More

A vital part of American culture is hard work leading to self-sufficiency. Few in American society question the work ethic, yet low-skilled men work much less in the United States today than they did a generation or two ago, in good times and bad. That fact goes far to explain the rise in unwed childbearing, the decline in marriage, and the persistence of family poverty in recent decades. Unless these men return to working at normal levels, progress against poverty will be difficult to achieve.

The broadest measure of work is the employment-to-population (E/P) ratio, or the percentage of a given demographic group that has jobs. There is a long-term trend toward nonwork by young men. In 1972, 76.1 percent of males age twenty to twenty-four worked, but by 2007, that figure had fallen to 71.7 percent, a decline of nearly 6 percentage points. This was before the Great Recession lowered the employment ratio of every demographic group. If the ratio in 2007 had been the same as in 1972, nearly 450,000 more men would have been employed.

Trends are even worse among young black males. In 1972, 70.4 percent of black men between the ages twenty and twenty-four were working. But in 2007, that percentage had fallen to 59.1, a decline of 16 percent.

If the problem were lack of jobs, one might expect a similar trend among low-income women, but their work levels have risen. In 1972, only 53.5 percent of women worked, but by 2007 the figure was 65.0 percent, a rise of over 21 percent. Even more impressive, in 1980 only 38.7 percent of never-married mothers worked, but by 2010 that figure had soared to 58.7 percent, an increase of over half. In fact, most of the increase occurred between 1995 and 1999 when the ratio leaped from 46.5 percent to 66.0 percent, a rise of over 40 percent in just four years. Never-married mothers are disproportionately black and in all probability living in the same neighborhoods as the black men whose work rates were falling.

Causes

How does one explain these paradoxical trends? If poor adults are working less, conservatives have traditionally blamed the welfare state. By taking care of fatherless families where parents did not work, government seemed to reward, and thus to encourage, improvident behavior. Mothers could have children without husbands, and the fathers could abandon them, knowing that welfare would provide. However, the link between more generous welfare and higher unwed pregnancy was never clear-cut, and it is men's work levels that have fallen—even though they themselves never received much welfare.

Liberals, for their part, usually blame low work levels on discrimination or the economy. In some cases, employers might still resist hiring minorities, although they hired many nonwhite mothers during welfare reform. The mismatch theory developed by William Julius Wilson, a professor at Harvard University, and others claims that jobs have become less available to men in cities due to economic trends. According to Wilson, the well-paid factory jobs that used to support many low-skilled men, including many blacks, and their families have largely abandoned urban areas for the suburbs, the South, or overseas, and this largely accounts for nonwork among black men.

The trouble with this theory, however, is that a plethora of low-skilled jobs in the service economy have replaced the factories. These positions typically pay less than industrial jobs, but enough to avoid poverty and welfare if one works steadily and claims remaining benefits such as Food Stamps and tax credits. Over the last three decades about 1.5 million legal and illegal immigrants have entered the country each year. Many of these migrants have no more skills than native-born nonworking men, yet the work rate for immigrant men has consistently been over 80 percent. Many of these immigrants live in the same cities where jobs seem to be lacking for black men.

Another economic theory is that low-skilled men may be able to find jobs, but they are unwilling to take them because wages are too low. Real wages for men with only a high school education or less did fall along with work levels in the 1970s and 1980s, tending to support this theory. However, unskilled wages rose for both men and women in the hot economy of the 1990s. And, while work levels did rise for women, they recovered very little for low-skilled men. And labor force participation rates—the proportion of adults working or seeking work—continued to fall for younger black men. There is also little evidence from research or program evaluations to suggest that higher wages would cause low-skilled men to work more consistently. Programs or experiments that offered nonworking men higher wages or wage subsidies if they worked have drawn at best a tepid response.

One explanation for falling work rates may simply be growing affluence. Ethnographic research shows that poor mothers can often piece together enough income to get by from various sources—child support, charity, and contributions from friends and relatives, as well as work and welfare—even without a regular working father in the home. Men fathering children feel less responsibility to support families because they know the mothers can survive without them. Low-wage work remains widely available, as the experience of immigrants shows, although it is less available during a recession.

Administrative Solutions

On this reasoning, simply to alter the economic forces around men is unlikely to change work behavior much. For most jobless men, low-wage jobs are already available yet are not consistently taken. Rather, government must reproduce the expectation of work that society levied informally in less affluent times. Nonworking adults must be expected to work, not only offered better chances to do so. Social policy must seek points of leverage where work can be made an obligation that the jobless have to discharge, on pain of some sanction.

That logic lay behind the welfare reform movement of the 1990s. Since improved work incentives had failed to stem rising dependency, an administrative work test was imposed on cash aid. Wage and child care subsidies rose, but equally important, more recipients than earlier were also made to work or look for work seriously as a condition of aid. That combination of “help and hassle” caused more than two-thirds of mothers to leave the rolls, and most of the leavers took jobs. Still more important, many mothers avoided welfare by going to work directly and never applying for aid. Those shifts lay behind the dramatic rise in poor mothers’ work levels cited earlier. Economic factors—a buoyant economy and the new wage and child care subsidies—also helped, but could not have sufficed alone. Rather, it was the firmer linkage of benefits with obligations that broke the mold of the old welfare system.

The best solution to the men’s work problem will probably be something similar. Unskilled men, like welfare mothers, need to earn more than the unaided labor market will give them. Few of

them qualify for the generous Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) that working single mothers get, because they are not supporting children. But by itself, simply to make work pay better will not cause many men to work more regularly. Rather, as in welfare, the programs serving them must directly require them to work. Unlike with welfare mothers, that pressure cannot come from the welfare-benefit system because few single men receive support directly from government.

Rather, it must come from other systems that already have authority over many nonworking men—the child support and criminal justice systems.

Child Support Enforcement

Besides welfare, the main institutional legacy of the weakening family has been child support enforcement. If fathers abandon their families, government will pursue them to ensure that they contribute to the support of their children. The federal government began funding and regulating state child support programs in 1975. Since the 1980s, the system has succeeded in establishing paternity and an order to pay support in the majority of child support cases.

But the men's work problem has limited child support's ability to collect money for poor and low-income mothers. The system gains its income largely by garnishing the wages of fathers owing support. But this and other collection methods assume that the fathers are employed, and the main problem is getting them to pay up. That is often true among middle-class fathers with regular jobs. The system, however, has failed to get most low-income fathers to pay. While most poor women today have child support orders obligating the father to pay, less than half receive any payments. That is often because the father lacks regular employment.

The child support system in many states has come to realize that just to crack down on nonpayers achieves little. Rather, the system must address the men's work problem more directly. To that end, many states have developed work programs designed both to enforce payment when the father has earnings and to get him to work when he does not.

When fathers who are in arrears on their payments appear before child support judges, they often claim they are jobless. The judges cannot verify this directly, but they can refer the fathers to a work program where attendance is enforced, on pain ultimately of incarceration. This forces the father either to admit he has a job and pay up, or to take serious steps to get a job. According to a survey in 2009, 47 percent of responding states already had work programs of some kind attached to child support, 90 percent of them mandatory. There are also fatherhood programs, funded by foundations and special federal grants that focus more on the fathers' problems and less on child support.

Evaluations of child support work programs are moderately encouraging. Their largest impact is on child support payments. Effects on work levels have generally been smaller than in the welfare work programs used in welfare reform. But it is likely that such programs, if well-implemented, can have some impact on fathers' work levels. It would help if child support aimed at raising employment as a goal, not simply on getting more money out of fathers. For if more fathers work, unwed pregnancy will likely fall and the whole need for child support will decline.

For parallel reasons, work programs have begun to appear in criminal justice. Most men in prison are fathers. They often have even worse problems with steady employment than other low-skilled men because of their prison records. Corrections officials realize that one key to whether convicts avoid a return to crime after prison is whether they get a job and work regularly. The parole system has proven insufficient in helping men leaving prison to find jobs. Thus, prison reentry programs have appeared that seek to get ex-offenders working quickly, as well as deal with their other problems. As in child support, evaluations are moderately encouraging. The best of these programs increase work and reduce recidivism, but they require further development. On the survey mentioned above, 65 percent of responding states already had such programs.

Getting to Scale

Most child support work programs are still small and detached from regular child support operations. Some have had difficulty obligating men to participate. These are reasons why the programs have so far had little effect on the men's work problem. To have more impact, the programs would have to expand to cover a much larger share of low-skilled, nonpaying fathers. For that, work programs would have to be integrated into regular child support operations and enforce participation more effectively.

Again, welfare reform is a precedent. In the 1980s, most welfare work programs were small, largely voluntary, and detached from regular agency operations, just as men's work programs are today. In evaluations, their impacts were enough to justify expansion, but not enough to change welfare fundamentally. Yet in the 1990s, due to welfare reform, the programs vastly expanded and became much more demanding. Few welfare mothers could escape pressure to work if they went on the rolls. Dependency then fell far more than the evaluations had foreseen. The key to this change was that welfare took on raising work levels as a central mission, alongside the traditional goal of supporting needy families.

Texas's NCP Choices

What a comparable shift might mean for child support is suggested by a remarkable program in Texas. The Lone Star State has the largest child support work program in the country. Noncustodial Parents Choices (NCP Choices) grew out of the state's regular welfare work program for custodial mothers. It serves noncustodial parents whose families are or have been on welfare. Once referred to NCP Choices, nonpaying men must either pay up, participate in the program, or go jail—in the state's phrase, "Pay, play, or pay the consequences."

The program is quite simple. Men in arrears are assigned to it by child support judges on the recommendation of child support administrators. Employment services are provided by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), the state's chief training agency. At TWC offices special staff help the men look for existing jobs; training is minimal. Should the men fail to show or drop out, they are referred back to the judges for enforcement action. TANF funds, channeled through TWC, pay for the program.

NCP Choices began in four counties in 2005 and has subsequently expanded to most of the state. Yet the program is still quite small compared to its potential caseload. In February 2009 it served only 3,194 clients statewide. That is partly because it is limited to men whose families have been on welfare (due to TANF funding) and owe at least \$5,000 in unpaid support. The men referred to NCP Choices tend to be hard-core nonpayers. If referral were invoked sooner in the administrative process, the caseload would be larger and perhaps somewhat more job ready.

Texas also has a prison reentry program called Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders) with a very similar structure. Parole officers refer clients in need of work to TWC, where special staff help them look for work. Both NCP Choices and Project RIO recorded effects on employment in evaluations. Both programs suggest the potential to build work enforcement into regular child support and criminal justice operations.

Implementation

To institute large programs like this, however, requires statecraft. State policymakers must do more than pay money or set up work incentives and assume that nonworking men will respond. They must create institutions with the capacity to help unskilled men work and the authority to require them to do so. To do that poses political and administrative challenges.

NCP Choices obtained key political support when state child support and TWC officials worked together to design the program. Its features reflected hard experience with earlier work initiatives. It had a capacity to enforce attendance which earlier efforts had lacked, leading to low participation. The framers then sold it, first to their superiors, and then to the legislature. Their case was that child support could not be well enforced without a mandatory work program and that the costs would be more than covered by the greater child support that clients would pay. The success of the program on a small scale motivated its later expansion.

As the program grew, state officials had to get local officials on board. In both NCP Choices and Project RIO, managers had to sort out conflicts between the parent agencies (child support and criminal justice) and TWC, whom they relied on to handle employment. In NCP Choices, local child support judges had to be persuaded to refer men to the new program and to devote courtroom time to enforcing attendance. This administrative role was uncomfortable for many judges, but they accepted it as necessary to get better child support compliance.

NCP Choices also created computer systems so that staff at all the agencies involved could access the same information about cases. Effectively, administrators built a new organization bridging child support agencies and TWC at both the state and local levels. Common purpose uniting staffs at all levels was essential to that effort. As in welfare reform, it was not enough to change laws and policies at the top. Routines had to be altered down to the local level so that the expectations reaching clients actually changed.

Other states innovating in men's work programs show this same combination of high-level political attention and bureaucratic willingness to change. Conversely, in states with little innovation, elected leaders have not focused on the men's work problem, and agencies are content with established routines. Child support continues to emphasize payment by fathers who are already working, while criminal justice enforces parole rules on ex-offenders, even though these measures do not suffice to raise work levels. As the high and growing incidence of men's work programs shows, however, thinking is changing.

National Policy

The best hope to solve the male employment problem is to accelerate the movement toward expanded work programs. Probably 1.2 million low-skilled men are already obligated to work yet are not doing so—men who owe child support without paying and ex-offenders on parole without working. To create work programs for these groups would cost from \$1 to \$5 billion a year, depending on program details. It is hard to justify any new spending in today's harsh budget climate, yet the cost would be largely recouped in higher child support collections, reduced incarceration, and other offsets.

Currently, federal funding for male work programs falls well short of these sums, and most of the funding consists of transient project grants. The best regular funding would be to qualify child support work programs for matching funds under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, the source of other federal child support funding.

The other need is more and better evaluations to learn more about how to optimize work programs for men. Of pilot programs to date, only two have received experimental evaluations, and many have not been evaluated at all. If government is to invest more in these programs, policymakers need more evidence that doing so is cost-effective and will visibly impact the problem. There are also several unresolved issues in program design. One of these is what share of nonworking men should be subject to enforcement. Another is whether programs should attempt to create jobs for men who are difficult to employ, versus seeking to place them in the private sector. Comparative assessments of different strategies could help here, just as they did in optimizing welfare work programs in the 1990s.

For nonworking men, like welfare mothers, the way forward toward steadier employment is programs that can both promote work and enforce it.

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