

Public Attitudes Toward Welfare and Welfare Reform: A focus group report by Public Agenda for the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

This pilot study of public attitudes toward welfare and welfare reform is based on six focus groups conducted by Public Agenda between June and July 1995. The focus groups were held in Middletown (NY), Birmingham (AL), Cincinnati (OH), Denver (CO), Albuquerque (NM), and Sacramento (CA). Each of the groups was composed of a cross-section of about ten participants, demographically representative of the nation. Those who had been on public assistance as adults were screened out from the groups. Racially, the groups were all-white with the exception of one group of seven African Americans conducted in Birmingham. As with all focus group reports, the following should be viewed as preliminary hypotheses rather than definitive findings.

Overview

Focus group participants seem to approach welfare with a singular sense of moral outrage, as if it represents a challenge to how they live their own lives. Much of the anger is driven by people's sense that the system is rife with abuse and undermines fundamental values. But as participants struggle to construct a "new welfare," they are guided by strong moral and practical concerns. These move them to fashion a series of safeguards and safety nets, all aimed at insuring a "soft landing."

Major themes on people's frustrations with welfare and where welfare has gone wrong

- Many participants talk about welfare as an affront that mocks the rules and values they live by. They often express outrage that while they struggle and sacrifice to make do, welfare recipients do not.
- Respondents often start by venting with horror stories about welfare fraud. But their more fundamental concern seems to be with abuse -- people staying on welfare without making an effort to get off, and generations passing welfare on to generations.
- People's sense of economic insecurity may underlie some of their impatience with welfare and its recipients. It is also possible that people have less patience and sympathy in an expanding economy, when they think that jobs are more easily found.
- People's attitudes toward welfare programs seem more driven by a moral calculus than by a financial one. They sense welfare undermines the work ethic and traps people in unproductive lives. Recipients and society suffer as a result.
- Most people interviewed repudiate the welfare system. It represents the status quo: under-policed programs that encourage dependence and abuse. But they seem very supportive of assistance to the poor, which they interpret to mean a temporary safety net for people who need help.
- Focus group participants often think people stay on welfare because they do not have a financial incentive to get off. There is also a sense that welfare no longer carries a stigma, and that an important moral deterrent to abuse has been lost as a result.

Major themes emerging from participants' views toward welfare reform

- People spontaneously reach for time limits on welfare, but they also spontaneously propose a myriad of programs to help recipients sustain themselves outside of welfare. They are also willing to consider some flexibility with time limits on a case-by-case basis and when there are good reasons.
- Participants strongly believe in the redemptive power of work and search for strategies that move recipients into the mainstream economy. They support training, education and child care programs because they represent an investment in getting people off welfare and into work.
- Some participants voice caution and warn that job training and flexible time limits open up welfare to the same sort of abuse and permanency that outrages people to begin with.
- People are more likely to trust their local government to run welfare rather than Washington, but some want welfare to be wholly managed by private charities.
- Participants are particularly concerned with ending the generations-on-welfare cycle. They want to move mothers off welfare and into jobs, and support the transition with training, education and child care. They are often willing to provide welfare benefits for a first child on welfare, but are opposed to additional benefits for additional children.

Major themes on race and welfare

- All-white groups seemed very reluctant to engage in discussion that connected race to welfare.
- When they do talk, whites reach for sociological and historical explanations for the higher public assistance rates among blacks. Some think past discrimination is also to blame, but a few also think blacks have a "victimization" mentality.
- The attitudes of black participants towards welfare seemed to mostly track those of whites. But when it comes to the race-welfare discussion, they believe blacks receive unfair and disproportionate attention from the media.

I. What the public doesn't like about welfare

What fuels the anger about welfare is that it is seen as an affront to the rules and values by which people live. Although fraud captures their attention, their main complaint is abuse: people taking assistance when they don't really need it and could be working. It's a question of moral calculus: it's not the cost of the programs themselves, but the values they instill. For most, welfare teaches dependency and complacency.

What are people so angry about?

One of the more powerful impressions conveyed by the focus groups is the sense of outrage many participants felt. People in the focus groups reacted to welfare as if it were an affront that mocked their own commitment to working and struggling in the face of life's difficulties. They told stories about welfare recipients who seemed to thumb their noses at the rules and values by which most people live. Their primary resentment did not stem from the cost of welfare. Their comments reflected a moral outrage, as if they were saying: "While we are working hard, they are making us look like chumps; they think we're stupid for working."

"This woman said to me, 'I go down to the bar, I have another child, and I get a raise. What do you do? I get paid for playing.' That statement has remained with me."

Sacramento woman

"I'll be doing my route and a 12-year-old will ask me 'why are you doing that, why are you working?' I say this and this and they say, 'Well I'm not going to do that...I'm going to be like my mom and dad, I'll just receive Section 8 like they do.' At that age they already know that, 'why should I do what you do, sweating hard when I could just sit at home and collect for free!' There is something wrong right there."

Middletown postman

It is important to understand that most of people's anger is driven by their rejection of fundamental features of the welfare system as they see it. They gravitate to the most outrageous examples of fraud not because they think fraud is the primary problem but because these examples symbolize a system that is badly out of control.

Other impressions add to their sense of resentment. Occasional brushes with welfare recipients who drive better cars, buy better food, or wear more expensive clothes than they do tend to stay with them. Many of the more intense comments at the focus group sessions were grounded in personal experiences and observations of friends, family or neighbors who were on welfare. In every group someone would tell an anecdote about a welfare recipient in front of them on the grocery check-out line.

"I go to the grocery store, and we work our rear ends off, and I have to make the best possible choices for the food I feed my children. And I see these people, stacks and stacks of steaks in their baskets!"

Sacramento woman

"You scrimp and save for everything you want and then you go to their house, and they say 'I got this today and I got that.' Their fridge is overflowing with food."

Cincinnati woman

"That's one thing I get angry about. You go to the grocery store and you're walking down the lane and you're watching what you buy, and maybe you're not buying all the brands that you would buy. And then you see someone in line in front of you, and they have everything, and they have steaks."

Cincinnati woman

Fraud is there...

When people talk about welfare, they often start with horror stories about fraud: Food Stamps sold at a discount, welfare mothers collecting for non-existent kids, mail boxes collecting welfare checks for people who live in other countries, and so forth.

"It's the ability to defraud the system. They can get \$100 of Food Stamps and turn around and get \$20 of drugs on the street. There's no policing of what they're handing out."

Denver man

"These people are living in luxurious places, driving luxurious cars, and I don't think they need the help. I deliver the checks, and I see how many are going out there and I see who they're going to. These people are getting four, five checks a month, each kid living in 3,000-square-foot homes and driving Lexuses."

Middletown man

But abuse is the real problem

Although participants often talk about abuse and fraud interchangeably, a little probing brings out some very important distinctions. Abuse to participants means taking advantage of the system: people staying on welfare because it is easy to do so and not making an effort to get off. This seems to be one of people's fundamental frustrations with welfare. Respondents want government to lend a temporary helping hand to people in genuine need so they can get back on their feet. Instead, they get welfare: a permanent way of life often passed on from generation to generation.

"When I think of it [welfare], I think of abuse. It's abused in many ways. Help them get on their feet, help them get a job, even if it's a McDonald's. They abuse the system by just taking it or just keep having babies to stay on it."

Birmingham woman

"Welfare is generational, it's handed down to sons and daughters. It's a way of life."
Cincinnati woman

"[What bothers me most is] people taking advantage of it. Sitting home, watching TV, going to amusement parks, they're using our tax money."
Denver woman

Most participants seemed sensitive to the unpredictability of life -- anyone could find themselves helpless and in need of emergency financial assistance. The government should be there for citizens in those situations, they thought. That is an appropriate role for the government to play. What grates people is welfare as a lifestyle.

"The government has an obligation to the citizens and the citizens have an obligation back to the government. It's a two-way street. We work and pay our taxes, and if we fall on hard times assistance should be there."
Albuquerque man

"There are definite situations where people need help. And anyone who needs help for short-term, it's fine. There are people on the streets because of catastrophes, and I can't fault the government for wanting to help them."
Cincinnati man

Do tougher times lead to tougher attitudes toward welfare?

Americans believe they have been through tough economic times and surveys show economic insecurity is still prevalent despite a growing economy. The insecurity seems to be driven by perceptions that no job is safe and that the glory days of wage growth have been replaced by stagnating wages. Yet while ordinary folks think they have to work through such times, they often perceive welfare recipients to be "standing above the fray," immune to the pressures and struggles working people face. They feel they have had to sacrifice and take second jobs -- why shouldn't welfare recipients do the same?

"Honest, hardworking people are getting laid off. And you can't get medical coverage. But you walk across the border, and instantly you're qualified. It's too easy to get. They give you food, housing. It's a free lunch for these guys. And we work all our lives and we don't get the same benefits."
Sacramento man

"I'm sick and tired of these people saying, 'I have a right to have children!' I've worked since I was 16, my dad worked up until 3 days before he died at the age of 85, and I never felt I could afford to have children, and yet my taxes are paying for these people to have three, four, ten children."
Albuquerque woman

"I work at a bank and some people are bringing in 4 to 5 [welfare] checks, totaling \$2,500 and you have an old woman right behind them with a check for \$300 that has to last her the whole month. To me, that's wrong."

Birmingham woman

In the same vein, some working women who have had to leave their children in daycare reacted indignantly to the suggestion that mothers on welfare should stay at home and raise their children. They have had to make the sacrifice, they could not afford the luxury of staying at home to raise their kids. Why should welfare mothers be protected from making those same hard choices, they ask?

"I didn't get to stay home with my children, I had to give that up. So why should I pay so she can stay home with hers?"

Cincinnati woman

"I'd have loved to have stayed home when my daughter was two or three, but I couldn't. I had to work. You're giving them a choice of just sitting home and collecting money. I'm glad I worked because I want my daughter to see that and learn that, so she'll have some pride and dignity also."

Birmingham woman

It is possible that attitudes toward welfare soften during economic downturns. People may be more sympathetic toward welfare recipients when recessions hit and unemployment goes up -- being in need may be more understandable during such times. But the other side of the coin is that in an expanding economy, with low rates of unemployment, people have a hard time understanding why recipients are not working. This might explain why the 38% who said the government is spending too much on welfare in 1991 grew to 54% in 1993 and to 60% in 1994 (NORC, General Social Surveys).

It's more than just the money

It would be easy to dismiss the sentiments cited above as wild overreactions to the abuse that will inevitably afflict large programs or to the occasional welfare scam. But the feelings seem to go much deeper. For example, when the moderator introduced the possibility that welfare did not cost taxpayers very much, participants became more indignant rather than mollified. Welfare seems to sting people not so much because it costs them money but because it challenges their fundamental notions of what it means to be an American. Participants portray a system that works against basic American values: the work ethic and the belief that individuals have a responsibility to provide for their families and contribute to society. The public's attitudes toward welfare seem driven by a moral calculus, not a financial one.

"Welfare has nothing to do with the amount of money it costs. I go to school and work a job and am in the National Guard. If I can do all these things and still have a 3.8 grade point, how come you can't get off your butt and get to work?...That's the big problem, not the money."

Cincinnati man

"You're eroding peoples' self-esteem, their ambition to become a productive citizen in our society. By giving out handouts, a certain element is satisfied with doing absolutely nothing."

Sacramento man

"I don't think the percentage has anything to do with the way I feel about welfare. Whether it's 1% or 5%, it wouldn't matter as far as I'm concerned. I think the system is backwards. They need to change things in the education program, teach them to complete school, and that everyone has to contribute to society."

Middletown woman

Many people focus on the negative societal costs of welfare programs: kids are taught the wrong values, the country loses productive citizens, and crime is encouraged.

"It doesn't make a damn bit of difference how much it costs. People that abuse it are destroying the moral fiber of this country. The kids coming up on welfare, it tends to add to the criminal element on down the line, because they don't have the good moral fiber anyone brought up in a working household will be brought up in."

Sacramento man

"It's the cost, [but it's also] the wrong thing, and it's just not how children should be taught. Each individual should put forth an effort and try to be a tax paying citizen and help the country."

Birmingham woman

Others are even more concerned about the effect welfare programs have on recipients. It seems to them that the system ensnares recipients in a life of dependency. Once caught in this trap, welfare recipients' daily struggles might ease somewhat, but their aspirations and hopes for the future are doomed.

"This is the worst thing about welfare, and if you stay on it for too long it changes you, you become complacent, dependent, you lose your dreams."

Albuquerque woman

"Welfare cripples people. They're looking for a handout. That shouldn't be. They've become dependent."

Birmingham man

"Welfare has a negative effect on people, get's them used to getting a handout. Welfare gets people into the mediocrity of life, and they get stuck in that rut."

Denver man

II. Where welfare has gone wrong

Most focus group participants repudiated the welfare system, which they see as a network of programs that encourages both long-term dependence and abuse. But they seem very supportive of assistance to the poor, which they interpret to mean a temporary safety net for people who need help. Many think people stay on welfare because they do not have a financial incentive to get off. There is also a sense that welfare no longer carries a social stigma, which some participants think was an effective deterrent to welfare abuse in the past.

Why people reject welfare and like assistance to the poor

When asked, in every focus group most participants distinguished assistance to the poor from welfare. To them, assistance is a helping hand to someone who has hit a stretch of bad luck, and that assistance may not even involve the government. Welfare, on the other hand, often represents a permanent condition, a dependent lifestyle, and is government supported.

Survey data show the public is much more willing to support spending on "assistance to the poor" than on "welfare." Some analysts point to this discrepancy as evidence that the public's opposition to welfare is based on superficial prejudice. The public does not object to the actual programs, goes their argument, only to the label heading them. But the focus group discussions are compelling in suggesting that the reverse is true. People simply hate the current combination of programs that fall under the welfare heading -- they reject welfare as it is currently constituted. Aid to the poor is what they want, and this they define as a safety net, temporary assistance to the person in trouble. Putting a different label on the myriad of programs that currently constitute welfare would do little to improve the public's estimation of it. Welfare by any other name would not smell sweeter.

To focus group participants, welfare represents the status quo they oppose: it fosters dependency, it is fraught with abuse, and it involves the government. Assistance to the poor is what they want: a temporary helping hand to the truly needy.

"It has to do with the permanency of it. [With] assistance you get the impression that it's temporary, until you get back on your feet. And welfare, people just get on there and stay on it the rest of their lives."

Cincinnati man

"Assistance implies they work, they need help but they're going to make it temporary. But, you have people who are on it for generations, that's their job."

Middletown man

"I think assistance should be a temporary thing, whereas welfare is more of a lifestyle for these people. Just like women have more babies so they can get more welfare. Assistance means I'm going to help you for a short time, but welfare is a lifestyle, it's a life thing."

Albuquerque woman

"Welfare is the government, assistance to the poor is Red Cross, churches, anything."
Birmingham woman

The welfare system is to blame

While welfare recipients receive their share of scorn from the focus group participants, they are not typically seen as innately flawed individuals. Many people think the system is to blame for the rampant abuse. There was a widespread sense that not enough incentives are built into the system to move people off welfare. As currently configured, welfare seems to entrap people and entice them to do as little as possible. There is not enough screening to make sure only those eligible receive help and there is not enough effort to move people back into the working world. Recipients are certainly not seen as innocent victims, but participants think they are acting rationally given the rewards and the rules of the game.

"I don't fault people in general. It's the responsibility of the government and administrators to structure welfare so people do not get led into that rut, that they are empowered to get out and get training and take care of their families."

Denver man

"The system is just irresponsible government. They make it hard to get out of. They just give and give and generations just take it. And those that work keep paying for it."

Birmingham man

"There's no policing of what they're handing out. It's a system that might be needed, but there's no policing behind it."

Denver man

People also believe that welfare recipients have learned to negotiate the system, and that word of mouth guides them on what to do to get benefits. Some even think that the administrators running the programs encourage welfare dependency to maintain their jobs.

"It's like psychiatrists. They're not going to help you because if you're cured, you're not going to come back for another \$90 hour next week. Social services does the same thing: they keep the problem going because it's their job. If they helped people, they'd be out of a job."

Middletown man

"A co-worker told me how they told her how to qualify for it, how to work the loopholes, like if the baby was a certain weight, or an inch shorter, they'd get it."

Cincinnati woman

Why do recipients stay on welfare?

Focus group participants say that people stay on welfare because it makes financial sense for them to do so. Many also feel that the sense of shame and stigma that had been attached to welfare is largely gone.

Participants often believe that welfare recipients conduct a cost-benefit comparison of the rewards of staying at home versus going to work, and conclude that it is in their best interest to stay home. While focus group participants generally do not believe that welfare provides recipients with a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, they do think that recipients are financially better off receiving welfare than entering the labor market at minimum wage levels.

"They say you can make more on Food Stamps and housing and healthcare than you can on minimum wage. So there's no incentive."

Birmingham woman

"There has to be a disincentive to getting on the system and an incentive to get off. And until that happens, there's no reason for them to try anything else."

Middletown man

"The welfare money they get is more than they can make when they first start out in the job market. They look at the short-term instead of suffering through until they get that promotion."

Sacramento man

There is also a widespread perception that for many people welfare no longer carries a stigma, and that an important moral deterrent to abuse has been lost as a result. Shame once played a useful function, pressuring people to get off welfare as quickly as they could. The stigma served as a disincentive to relying on it too quickly or too long. But where there used to be shame and embarrassment about getting welfare, participants feel there is now acceptance, and for some even pride.

"No one is ashamed of getting it, they're even proud of it. Our parents would have been embarrassed to be on welfare. But these days, people don't care. They don't take enough pride in themselves to care about it."

Denver woman

"When I was growing up, it was called home relief, and it was extremely embarrassing to be on it, so most people were desperate. We were on it and they came every week. And if you had a new lamp, boom! you were right off it. It made people say, 'I don't want to live like this, I don't want my children to live like this.'"

Sacramento woman

Whether welfare recipients felt shame seemed to determine whether participants felt empathy or disdain toward them. The logic of empathetic reactions seemed to work this way: if a recipient resisted getting something like Food Stamps because of pride or a sense of shame, then he was feeling what participants would feel in his place. They could therefore empathize and often wanted such recipients take advantage of the benefits. But if recipients did not feel a sense of shame, participants could emotionally disengage and not empathize. Such recipients were less likely to be seen as deserving benefits.

Comparing her daughter to more "typical" welfare recipients, one Birmingham woman recounted with a touch of pride her daughter's reluctance to use Food Stamps, even though she became eligible when her home was destroyed by a hurricane. Her daughter finally relented and took them as part of disaster relief, but sent her husband to do the food shopping.

III. Moving toward reform

Just as people are driven by a sense of moral indignation in rejecting welfare as it is, so are they guided by a sense of moral obligation in reforming it. They are determined to end the elements of welfare most offensive to them: welfare as a permanent lifestyle, welfare as a free ride without reciprocal obligations and responsibilities, and welfare as an ignoble legacy passed on to new generations. But rather than simply "clearing the rolls," many want a broad range of programs including job training, counseling, childcare and healthcare benefits. Time limits and a work component are fundamental to this approach, along with a certain amount of flexibility. This "soft landing" theme was a prominent feature of virtually all proposals discussed in the focus groups. Participants see this as an investment in the future: the pay-off will be fewer people on welfare and more contributing citizens.

Cut off benefits to the able-bodied who have no kids?

The first reform proposal introduced by the moderator was to cut benefits to able-bodied recipients who have no kids. Many people have no problem cutting off benefits to such recipients. Some are incredulous that able-bodied people are eligible for welfare to begin with.

"How did they get on welfare on the first place? And the government believed it! He never should have got on there."

Denver woman

But others voice caution, and prefer a go-slow approach. This was somewhat surprising, given participants' vehement complaints about welfare abuse and since the case against this category of recipients was the simplest to make. It was a first indication that people's instinct is to maintain a safety net, even in the face of their frustrations with the current system.

"You can't just cut them off. All able-bodied are not the same. What if it's a 57-year-old woman? How is she going to go out and get a job if she has no skills?"

Middletown woman

"To do that [get people off welfare], you're going to have to put them into training. Give them a reasonable time. Immediate would be terrible, people would turn to crime."

Denver woman

The soft landing

If people's attitudes toward welfare are driven simply by anger at the programs and the recipients, the reforms they espouse would have a punitive and retaliatory feel to them. But most people we interviewed want to give recipients an opportunity to reclaim a normal life, which means giving them the tools essential for survival.

Just as many people spontaneously reach for definite time limits on welfare and insist that recipients start working, they also suggest a myriad of initiatives and programs to prepare recipients for when their time is up. Furthermore, they usually propose these programs on their own, well before the moderator brings the subject up. People want welfare recipients to get education and job training and even health care while their time limits run. They want mothers on welfare to get child care to make it possible for them to enroll in such self-improvement programs.

"[The goal is to] Train and educate them so they can get a decent job and support their families."

Denver man

"They should retrain you, but let you have the medical things, subsidize you until you really get on your feet."

Middletown woman

"If you give them training and childcare, then you can get them out in two years."

Middletown woman

Some participants may support rehabilitative programs to avoid feeling guilty about cutting poor people off from welfare benefits -- they may not want to seem harsh and cold-blooded. But for most people, support seems driven by a genuine desire to help recipients sustain themselves. They hope that such efforts will lead to a real solution to the welfare problem.

Instead of permanency . . . time limits

A time limit is an essential component to reform for virtually all participants. It is compelling to participants because it directly addresses one of their key grievances: that welfare too often devolves into a permanent lifestyle. They think that time limits would set a goal and create a sense of urgency for both recipients and the government to break the cycle of dependency and defeatism.

"If you have a limit of one or two years, people will know, 'Hey I've only got two years, I've got to get going, I have to do something now, it's gonna run out.' It makes people at least attempt something. "

Middletown man

"It's like children growing up and never leaving home. How long are we going to have to take care of somebody? There has to be a time limit, there has to be a cutoff. "

Cincinnati woman

"It could be one or two years, but it starts the wheels turning, it makes the administration more efficient. It helps the program to have a certain goal, they know they have x-amount of time to get this person independently living."

Middletown woman

When the moderator put a two-year time limit on the table, many people complained that this was too much time.

"Why two years? Why ten months? Too long. I'd want at the maximum 4 months. The maximum."

Albuquerque man

"I think 6 months is reasonable. It takes people a while to adjust and get back on their feet. No skills? You have six months to get them. The government could help her."

Sacramento man

But respondents' commitment to a time limit is not as rigid as may first appear. When probed, many participants are willing to consider extensions if welfare recipients are not ready for legitimate reasons. It was understandable to some if a woman failed to complete a training course because her child was sick, for example. The system might make an exception in her case, but should follow-up to make sure she finally completes it.

"You can't cut it off right at 2 years, you have to look at each case individually. But give them some consequences." Denver man

"It depends on the individual. For some people, 6 months wouldn't be enough. If it would take two years for the program, I'm all for that. [Another participant: 'What about a 4-year nursing program?'] If she can show she's going to school, using the money for the right things, ok. Childcare, ok. Because when she's done, she can pay for her own childcare and go to work. So her kids won't be on it either. Case by case. Build flexibility in. "

Sacramento man

After this point some participants would become confused and uncertain. What constitutes justifiable circumstances? Where should the system draw the final line? People end up reaching for a very subtle and finely tuned system that could carefully distinguish legitimate from illegitimate extensions. They struggle with fears about making mistakes and cutting people off wrongly.

The redemptive power of work

Getting welfare recipients to work -- the antithesis to welfare -- was a dominant theme of the discussions. A primary goal is to get them off welfare and into the mainstream economy; another is to have welfare recipients earn their benefits. The value of work is seen as multifold, but underneath it all is the belief that work can transform recipients, offering a sense of pride and individual accomplishment. Work can also reestablish reciprocity and supplant dependency -- getting something for nothing is not good for recipients or for society. Whether this means menial work like cleaning parks and roadways or more skilled work like staffing libraries, taxpayers would be rewarded with services performed and recipients would develop a work ethic.

"Work teaches responsibility. If I'm responsible for myself, I don't expect things from other people."

Birmingham woman

"When you work, they're not getting something for nothing. It's important for me. It sounds petty, but it's important to know that everyone is doing their part."

Sacramento man

"Everybody should work. They shouldn't sit at home on welfare, children or no. They need to get self-esteem from what they do. And they'll carry that from generation to generation. They need to interact with other people and that will help these people, too."

Sacramento woman

"[Work will give them] self-respect. Earning that money, not just getting it free."

Middletown woman

Many think that even menial jobs with low pay will serve a useful purpose because recipients are trying to improve their lot. Participants also believe that the children of welfare recipients will learn the work ethic from seeing their parent(s) work. And if recipients work, some believe, there would be less crime. The important thing for respondents is to get welfare recipients back on course.

"You're becoming a contributing member of society, even if it's picking up leaves. And after a while, you're going to get another job."

Sacramento man

"It might set a work ethic example for their kids. The kids see the equation of work hours equal income."

Sacramento woman

"If people weren't collecting welfare they'd be off the street and there'd be a lot less crime."

Cincinnati woman

Focus group participants are not interested in forcing recipients to work in order to punish them. Instead, they want recipients to make an effort, to struggle to improve their condition. This is the lesson they draw from their own lives. Too many welfare recipients stop struggling and come to accept their situation.

Reform as an investment

When all is said and done, the addition of the training, education and child care programs people say they want amounts to a giant expansion -- and redirection -- of the welfare system. When confronted with the enormous costs implied by a soft-landing strategy, people hardly blink. They acknowledge the higher costs but see it as an investment that will pay off in the future. Once again, we find that money is a side-issue -- albeit an important one -- when compared to the issue's moral dimension.

"I think [job training] would be money well spent. What are you teaching the people who are doing nothing now? What are they learning? It's not just a budget issue, it's a value issue." Middletown man

But in constructing their "new welfare," people explicitly assume that all help, education and retraining will be short term and temporary. They are creating a "high end" system but one that gives recipients a finite period of time in which to prepare themselves. In the long run, they reason, taxpayers may even save money. Their safety latch is the time limit proviso.

"I'd be willing to do what it takes to get her off welfare in six months: if that means her check has to be \$100 more a month to pay for childcare. The investment of six months, even if it's double, is better than 30 years of welfare."

Sacramento man

"It has to be temporary. If you tell me it's going to cost more money now, but save us in the long run, it'd be worth it. Tell recipients regardless, you've got two years, and if you want training, you can get it."

Cincinnati man

"Anything you can do, even if it costs a lot of money to get the training, do. The long-term thing is to make the system better. It's obviously not working now, and anything you can do to make it work is worth it. It's worth a try."

Middletown man

Naysayers to the soft landing

Some participants were wary of expanding welfare in order to reduce it. A few were opposed to the soft-landing approach on ideological grounds. But most naysayers had more concrete concerns: job training is often ineffective and flexible time limits open up the program to the same sort of abuse and permanency that outraged them to begin with. Their arguments sometimes stirred second-thoughts among participants who had been struggling -- and sometimes getting frustrated -- with complex policies.

"The government had some of these schools, but these people would hardly ever go to class. It sounds wonderful, but the reality is there not going to go. Nobody is going to watch them."

Cincinnati woman

"You can get them through training programs, but you can't train people to be *workers*. They can get a job, but then they're going to lose it."

Sacramento woman

Take it away from Washington

When it comes to welfare -- and many other issues -- people often trust decision-making that is close by to be more efficient. They often prefer that the state or even county, rather than the federal, government run things. To the extent that the federal government is involved, participants want to limit its involvement to setting guidelines. Some focus group participants believe that welfare and training programs should be wholly managed by private charities. A recurring sentiment was that government, especially the federal government, is inherently incapable of running programs with efficiency and effectiveness.

"The states should run welfare. Things would be more manageable at the state level, it's smaller."

Middletown man

"State-run is in the right direction, but it's best if it goes all the way to private. It should be run like a corporation, pay the people well so they don't introduce fraud and abuse into the system. Give them incentives to help get these people off welfare."

Cincinnati man

"As you get the government involved, it mushrooms and mushrooms until any money that might have gone to [someone] is one millionth of a dollar. But at a community or city level, more money will go to that person because you have fewer tiers of government bureaucracy to go through."

Albuquerque woman

Welfare moms

One of the more vexing problems for participants is "welfare moms." They are often spontaneously cited as the clearest evidence of welfare gone wrong. A common complaint is that women have babies to get on welfare and have additional babies to get more money. As the discussion continues, some clarify that what they really mean is that people take additional risks because they know the option of welfare is there in case they need it.

"I don't feel they have more babies to get more welfare, but I think they feel comfortable having more babies because they know they've got money coming in. Welfare takes the worry away."

Albuquerque woman

When confronted with the issue of mothers on welfare, people express the same desire for firmness and fair warning as they do in their approach to time limits and able-bodied recipients. 'We can understand one mistake,' people say, 'but be warned: you will not get additional money for additional babies.'

"A lot of girls have babies not to get on welfare the first time: they have it because of a lack of self-esteem, or to get attention, or to trap a boy. But once they're on it, they see it as a way to get more money, and that's why they have additional children."

Sacramento man

One proposal introduced by the moderator was to require women with children to get a Norplant implant before they could receive welfare benefits. There was little excitement at the prospect of ending the generations-on-welfare cycle through this method. Even with all their anger and frustration with welfare, participants stuck to a carrot-and-stick approach to controlling the problem.

"It's like saying 'You get yourself sterilized and you can have benefits.' It's the same thing, although it's not as drastic. I don't think they should do it. It comes down to choice."

Denver woman

"They need to check [Norplant] out more. A couple girls died from it. But they need to stop 'em from having so many babies."

Birmingham woman

What about welfare for legal immigrants?

Participants seem divided on whether legal immigrants should have the right to collect welfare. One strand of thought reasons that if immigrants are here legally, they are entitled to the same benefits that everyone else enjoys. Others believe there is something wrong with letting people into the country to work and contribute, only to have them take advantage of welfare. For many, a sense of commitment to the U.S. on the part of immigrants was important: if they have been paying taxes for 5 years, or have become American citizens, then they are just like everyone else. If on the other hand, they are just slipping in to the country to get benefits, that is wrong.

"If they're legal immigrants, they should be treated as U.S. citizens."

Middletown man

"They should spend some time contributing to the system. Once they're a citizen, yeah, they're entitled. If he's been paying taxes, yeah, ok."

Albuquerque man

"I was watching on TV about how a lot of them are coming in and the first thing they're doing is getting on welfare and they've never worked here in their lives."

Cincinnati man

"They should be American citizens before they can get welfare. People come from Mexico to have their kids here."

Cincinnati woman

IV. Whites, Blacks and welfare

The all-white groups seemed very reluctant to engage in discussion that connected race to welfare. When they did, whites reached for sociological and historical explanations for the higher public assistance rates among blacks. Some blamed past discrimination against blacks, but a few also felt blacks have a "victimization" mentality. The attitudes of blacks participants toward welfare seemed to mostly track those of whites. But when it comes to the race-welfare discussion, they believe blacks receive unfair and disproportionate attention from the media

A difficult conversation

The focus groups were segregated by race in anticipation that their composition would determine how frank the discussions about race and welfare were. In fact, even all-white groups seemed very reluctant to engage in discussion that connected race to welfare.

Where there had been spirited conversation, the mention of race and welfare brought a deafening quiet. Are blacks more likely than others to be on welfare? Silence was the typical reaction to this question. It was only when the moderator stated as a "fact" that blacks are more likely to be on welfare that people began to talk, as though they had now been given permission to discuss the issue.

The aversion to talking about race sometimes took on a physical dimension, with people squirming in their seats. In Sacramento, a well-spoken participant who had no trouble expressing his views until the mention of race unconsciously covered his mouth with his hand and sank in his seat. The moderator asked him if he was holding back, and he responded, "I'm afraid I'll sound like a racist if I speak." White people seem to need reassurance they could talk so it helped when the moderator cited a "statistical fact." It also helped that there were no blacks in the room.

In the end, there was often a feeling that not everything had been put out on the table. One Middletown woman who was very uncomfortable with this part of the discussion thought it was even wrong and hurtful to discuss the issue in racial categories and was happy to end it.

As may be with other issues where race is an important theme, there appear to be few incentives for whites to be fully candid. First, from the respondents' perspective, saying the wrong thing could land them with the brand racist. Second, if they think they are bigots, they may be afraid to let this show. The best strategy is to let somebody else do the talking.

An additional focus group conducted in New York City mixed whites, blacks and Hispanics. The race-welfare question was even more uncomfortable in this context (it was asked at the end). The blacks and Hispanics in the group were asked to speak first, but the whites were unwilling to speak after them. When the group ended, a visibly upset white woman lingered and complained to the moderator. She said it was unfair to let the blacks dominate the discussion at the end of the group. Asked why she had not given her views, she replied as a true New Yorker might: "I may have a big mouth, but I'm not stupid!"

What whites seem to think about blacks and welfare

When whites do talk, they often reach for sociological and historical factors to explain higher public assistance rates among blacks. White respondents often said that blacks had been denied education in the past, or that their parents had lower expectations for success for them, or that they lacked self-esteem. Some also saw the environment of the inner-city as reinforcing this behavior. Because of this, blacks are seen as more likely to go on welfare and to pass it on to their children.

"I don't think you'd be able to find the root cause anymore, because it's buried generations back. But you live by example and by your parents. You get sucked into it."

Sacramento man

"It's not just lack of opportunity but lack of perception: they don't see there are places to go. If you're living in a community where people are working fastfood or living on welfare, that's what you're going to think about doing."

Albuquerque woman

Some participants think that past discrimination is an important factor. Without equal opportunity, blacks have been relegated to lower income jobs and are therefore more likely to end up on welfare.

"When the welfare system was first started, blacks were forced onto the system because they were not allowed to take jobs that would pay better. They were in menial-type of jobs like maids and servants. They took it and it's going to be very hard to get them off."

Denver woman

"Sixty years ago minorities had very little chance. When welfare came about, it fed into that. Nowadays, I think anyone can succeed. But now it's passed on, it's generational."

Cincinnati man

But some participants think blacks have a "victimization" mentality that wrongly legitimizes being on welfare. These participants thought blacks had a "you owe me" attitude.

"It's like the attitude, in general -- and we shouldn't talk in general because there are a lot of good black families that have the same democratic ideals of this country -- but the majority attitude is 'You owe it to me. You kept us in slavery for so many years, you owe it to me.' That attitude, along with the lack of education, and no skills..."

Sacramento man

"The feeling that we owe them, the world owes them something. And that's generational too."

Cincinnati man

Not surprisingly, there was almost no talk of innate racial differences between blacks and whites regarding welfare. But a few whites generalized about a lack of a sense of responsibility about children and sex.

"I think we have a problem with absentee fathers in the black community. They don't stick around to take care of them or provide for them. Where there's a father-mother combination, you don't see as much welfare. I wouldn't have a problem saying it [if a black person were sitting here] because I think they'd agree with it, I think they know that."
Denver woman

"The men at the black community are not appalled at themselves, going around making babies and not taking care of them. They don't find anything wrong with that and neither do the women. No responsibility."
Sacramento man

What do blacks think about welfare?

In Birmingham and New York City, the attitudes of blacks toward welfare mostly tracked with those of whites. Blacks also seem angry about welfare, and for pretty much the same reasons as whites. They also talked about struggling, making tough choices about clothing and food, while recipients abused the system. While they are carefully planning and skimping, trying to better their situations through sacrifice, they see recipients with a "live for today" attitude, buying expensive sneakers or clothes.

"I've worked all my life and people on welfare should too. It should be for the strictly disabled. It's been so abused it's a joke."
Birmingham man

"I had a cousin on welfare and it was nothing for her to buy her son \$50, \$60 tennis shoes. I have to buy my shoes on sale! They don't understand how hard it is to get that money, they didn't work for it."
Birmingham woman

But there is one big difference with blacks: They believe they are being unfairly singled out, especially by the media. They say that television and newspaper pictures unfairly feature black people, giving all of them a bad reputation. They are also somewhat angrier about government's "complicity," about politicians not doing the right thing and creating programs that foster dependency.

"It's always been pointed at the blacks. And there's as many whites on welfare, more. The black man is labeled as being on welfare, robbing, stealing."
Birmingham man

"I think blacks get a bad rap. Most of the time any cop show on TV, it focuses on the blacks. There's many more white folks on Food Stamps and welfare. But they point the finger at the black man: he lazy, sitting back getting everything. All the money they give to farmers, that's rich welfare and that's my tax dollar, too."

Birmingham man

"I get angry at the politicians. If you give me money everyday I'll just keep coming back."

Birmingham man