

Appendix C: Review of Evidence on Disconnection

Review of Evidence on Prevalence of Disconnection

A number of studies demonstrate that a substantial minority of single mothers that left welfare find themselves disconnected at some point in time. Loprest and Zedlewski (2006) estimates that 14 percent of welfare leavers in 2002 were without earnings and had not worked in the past year, received neither TANF nor Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits (cash assistance for low-income persons with disability), and did not have a working spouse/partner. Turner, Danziger, and Seefeldt (2006) find that about one-tenth of low-income women who had formerly received welfare in one county in Michigan were chronically disconnected; that is, they had not worked or received welfare for an entire quarter over a six and a half year period. Other state studies report a disconnected population of former TANF recipients ranging from 14 to 20 percent (Acs and Loprest 2004).

In addition, studies show that a considerable number of low-income single mothers regardless of prior TANF receipt are disconnected. Blank and Kovak (2009) find that 20 percent of low-income single mothers in 2005 had very low levels of earnings, TANF, and SSI in the prior year and 14 percent were without income from another adult family member. They find the size of these groups had roughly doubled since 1990 when the comparable numbers were 10 and 7 percent, respectively. Recent work by Loprest and Nichols (2011) found the percentage of disconnected single mothers (regardless of prior TANF participation) has increased substantially over the last decade: about one in eight low-income single mothers was disconnected in 1996 and 1997, but about one in five was disconnected in 2008.

Review of Evidence on Material Hardship among the Disconnected Population

Studies of disconnected single mothers have demonstrated their very low incomes and experience of material hardships. Research shows that disconnected women are much poorer than other low-income single mothers. Blank and Kovak (2009) find that in 2005 over 80 percent of disconnected mothers have incomes under the poverty line compared with about 50 percent of all low-income single mothers. Loprest and Zedlewski (2006) find that in 2002 average income among disconnected former TANF recipients was \$6,178 compared to an average income of \$17,681 for other former TANF recipients. In addition to having low incomes, these families face high levels of material hardships. Over 40 percent of all disconnected low-income mothers in 2002 faced food insecurities (difficulties feeding their families), and a third were unable to pay rent or utilities at some point in the prior year. These low incomes and high levels of hardship raise concerns for the well-being of these mothers and children.

Review of Evidence on Benefit Use among the Disconnected Population

Disconnected women may rely on receipt of non-cash benefits such as food stamps and housing assistance. Loprest and Nichols (2011) find that in 2008 about half of disconnected families received benefits from Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a third from Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and a fifth received housing benefits. A third received child support benefits. Receipt of these benefits suggests avenues for policymakers to reach out to disconnected women as some of these women are already interacting with the public benefit system.

Review of Evidence on Employment Barriers among the Disconnected Population

Studies find high prevalence of barriers to work among disconnected populations as well. Blank and Kovak (2009) show that 10 to 20 percent of disconnected women experience barriers to work, and this percentage is higher for women who report multiple months of

disconnectedness. Loprest and Zedlewski (2006) find that two-thirds of disconnected former welfare recipients and almost half of disconnected low-income mothers who have never received welfare experience barriers to work.

Review of Evidence on Duration and Causes of Disconnection

Although research shows that on average, disconnected women are economically worse off than other low-income single mothers, relatively little research examines the dynamics of being disconnected. Blank and Kovak (2009) finds that women who were ever disconnected over a three year period were in this status for 7 months on average. However, about half of these women spent less than 4 months disconnected while about 5 percent spent more than two years in this status. Loprest and Nichols (2011) find that almost a quarter of low-income single mothers are disconnected for four or more months over a year and 11 percent are disconnected for a year or more. The circumstances and policy needs of women who are temporarily or chronically disconnected are likely to differ.

Research on what factors are associated with beginning and ending spells of disconnectedness is also limited. A study of former welfare recipients in an urban county in Michigan shows that presence of barriers (low education, physical limitations, learning disabilities, and use of illegal drugs or alcohol dependence) significantly increases the likelihood that a former TANF recipient would enter a spell of disconnectedness, and having multiple barriers has an even greater impact (Turner, Danziger, Seefeldt 2006). Nationally, Loprest and Nichols (2011) find that for all single mothers, losing a job is the reason most frequently associated with becoming disconnected. However, they also find that if a mother leaves TANF benefits, she has an almost 20 percent chance of becoming disconnected. Health and other barriers as well as living with other working adults are also significant contributors to becoming and remaining disconnected.

For additional information see Loprest, Pamela (2011) “Disconnected Families and TANF” (OPRE Report #2011-49) available online at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/disconnected.pdf>