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15 Years On, Still No Agreement on Welfare Reform's Impact

Posted by Neil deMause

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Neil deMause/Jarrett Murphy/City Limits

The panelists, clockwise from top left: Bich Ha Pham, Robert Doar, Frances Fox-Piven and Lawrence Mead.

Wednesday's panel on the 15th anniversary of welfare reform, held at NYU's Wagner School of Public Service, was certainly full of heavy hitters on the subject of how the 1996 law has affected American society. The lineup:

- New York City HRA Commissioner Robert Doar, chief proponent of the city's "Work First" welfare policies.
- CUNY sociology professor and Glenn Beck target Frances Fox Piven, who has written about poverty programs for more than 30 years.
- NYU politics professor Lawrence Mead, who provided the ideological underpinnings of Mayor Giuliani's welfare overhaul in the 1990s.
- Bich Ha Pham, policy director for the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies and author of several reports criticizing city benefits policies.

Yet as it soon became clear, the answer to the question posed by the panel's title—"Welfare Reform at 15: Is It Working?"—depended almost entirely on how you define "working."

Doar, the keynote speaker, began with an impressive array of statistics of how things have changed since the pre-reform era. Work rates of unmarried mothers are way up; welfare caseloads are way down; food stamp enrollment, after dipping in the '90s boom, is now up to "historic levels." Child poverty rates, meanwhile, have fallen from 43 percent to 30 percent since 1995.

The most recent Census figures show poverty again on the rise, he acknowledged, and "any increase in the poverty rate is a concern." Still, he said, "the important point is that in New York City, child poverty is still well below the rate in the late 1990s."

Pham, who noted she herself was raised partly on welfare after her family arrived in the U.S. as war refugees, answered with some of the same numbers but very different conclusions. "Since the Great Recession, as Commissioner Doar states, the welfare rolls have barely budged," she said. This, though, she

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took as a sign not of success, but rather of increased barriers to applying for benefits.

For example, she noted that the city now requires a 30- to 45-day "job search" period before welfare benefits kick in. "What you really want is some financial assistance to help pay your rent and your bills," she said, "and then to be able to go and look for a job on your own." Instead, said Pham, applicants have to spend full days on such activities as going door-to-door to ask local businesses if they're hiring. The result: a "huge dropoff" in welfare numbers thanks to people denied for failing to complete the job search program.

Doar's response: That's intentional. "What you are describing is the way the program is set up," he said. "We believe firmly that engaging people in activities to get to work in return for the receipt of cash assistance was the right public policy outcome."

Next, moderator Caitlyn Brazill of the NYU's Furman Center asked whether work requirements have been rendered untenable during a time of sky-high unemployment. Not at all, insisted Mead: "The assumption about unemployment is that there aren't enough jobs to make it feasible to require people to work. I question that." Surveys of non-working poor people, he said, show that only 12 percent say that they're not working because they can't find a job.

"I think it's reasonable to say that for most poor adults, they are still outside the labor force—that is, they are not looking for work," said Mead. "And so the need for requirements to look for work in welfare is still there." In fact, he said, with so many people in the city receiving food stamps and not working, "maybe we should extend something like the TANF work requirement to food stamps."

Piven positively sputtered in reply: "With something like 25 million people in the United States looking for full-time work and unable to find it, one has to wonder about the social benefits that would result from putting even more pressure on poor women and men to go out into the labor market and take whatever job they can get"—especially when single mothers are having to put children in day care to seek scarce jobs.

"I feel like I'm in an Alice in Wonderland world," continued Piven. "The top 1 percent collects 25 percent of income, collects 40 percent of wealth. And here we are peering at these very poor people, most of them women raising children, to figure out what's wrong with them that they still get a little bit of cash assistance? This is madness."

The social benefit, Doar interjected, is personal responsibility. The fact that many former welfare recipients have found jobs, he says, is an indicator of that: "I was as concerned as anyone about the awful potential outcomes that were described when welfare reform was passed, but none of that really took place." Requiring work, he said, is a societal value just as is supplying aid like food stamps to those who are working - and, as a bonus, helps establish credibility for social service programs with an otherwise hostile public. "If we lose that," he said, "then I think we really will have difficulty helping people in need."

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