



Survey Shows "Two Faces" Of Public Opinion On Welfare Reform

Americans Support Time Limits and Tough Work Requirements, But Reluctant to Abandon Those In Need

Public Defines Welfare Broadly Understands Key Details of Welfare Programs

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Menlo Park, CA -- A new Kaiser/Harvard survey of Americans nationwide has found that the public supports strong welfare reform measures, such as time limits and work requirements, but is reluctant to simply cut people off and leave them without some means of basic support.

The survey identifies four core beliefs that shape the public's policy preferences. Two lead the public to support time limits and other strong welfare policies: the belief that welfare causes more harm than good because it discourages work and causes family break up, and the belief that welfare costs the taxpayer too much money. But two other core beliefs make the public concerned that these same strong policies will leave low income people without basic support: the belief that lack of economic opportunity as much as personal responsibility is the reason people need welfare, and the belief that both government and people themselves have a shared responsibility for ensuring that people have a minimum standard of living.

Two-thirds (68%) of Americans favor ending welfare payments after two years for all able-bodied welfare

recipients, including women with pre-school children, and requiring them to take a job. But support for cutting off payments drops to 26 percent if the job pays low wages that would make it difficult to support a family, and to only 16 percent if the person is unable to find a job.

Large majorities favor government providing job training (87%) and public service jobs (74%) for people on welfare, and providing child care to low-income mothers who work or are in job training (85%). After education, training, health and child care benefits have been provided, 56 percent believe welfare recipients should be required to do community service work in exchange for continued benefits or have benefits cut off after a specified period of time. Only 10 percent believe the government should end all aid under these circumstances, and 25 percent believe the government should cut recipients off only after guaranteeing they have a job.

The public's desire to "do something" about welfare is also reflected in support for limits on welfare. Majorities favor requiring mothers to report the name of a child's father before they can receive welfare (81%), setting limits or denying welfare to non-citizens, including most legal immigrants (64%), denying additional benefits to women who have more children while on welfare (59%), and government limiting how fast welfare programs can grow, regardless of how many people may need assistance (capping welfare) (57%).

Nearly equal proportions of Americans say: 1) "We shouldn't let people who can't get or hold a job go hungry or homeless, and we need to continue welfare payments to these people" (44%), and 2) "We should have a firm limit on how long people can stay on welfare, regardless of the consequences, in order to get them to work" (43%).

"The jury is still out on what the public will support on welfare reform. At the moment they want four things that may be incompatible -- get people off welfare within two years, get them jobs that provide a minimum standard of living, don't let families suffer severe hardship, and don't raise taxes or cut government programs to do these things," said Drew Altman, Kaiser Family Foundation president and former welfare commissioner in New Jersey under Governor Tom Kean.

Two-thirds of Americans (66%) oppose a proposal that would end welfare benefits for unmarried women and their children if that meant some of the children would have to be cared for in group homes or orphanages. If such a proposal were enacted, the public overwhelmingly prefers having the government pay for group homes where mothers and their children live together (56%), rather than providing orphanages for the children (8%) or doing nothing (8%). A fourth of respondents said none of the above.

One important caveat should be added. The public is not prepared to sacrifice very much to see reforms enacted. Only about half are willing to pay more taxes or see other programs cut to provide job training (53% willing to 40% unwilling) and public service jobs (47% to 45%).

Awareness of Reform Proposals

At this early stage, the public is not yet following the welfare reform debate closely. In sharp contrast to the 47% who said in October 1993 that they were following news stories and other information about health care reform very closely (Kaiser/Harvard Survey, October 1993), only 13% say in this survey they have been following stories about welfare reform very closely.

Only three in ten Americans say they understand President Clinton's welfare proposals very (5%) or fairly well (25%). A similar proportion understand the Republican proposals very (7%) or fairly well (24%).

"Americans do not yet know the consequences of the various welfare reform proposals," said Dr. Robert J. Blendon, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Health Policy and Management at Harvard University. "As the debate continues and begins to focus on the implications of particular proposals -- whether they be severe negative consequences for individuals and families or increased taxes or cuts in other government programs -- the public is likely to become more cautious."

Welfare Spending

Asked to choose from a list of six areas which two consumed the largest share of federal spending, only 14 percent correctly named Social Security and 37 percent named defense as one of the top two. Four-in-ten Americans (40%) thought welfare was one of the two largest areas of federal spending.

When asked to define welfare, the public identified the following six major federal government programs from a list of nine as being welfare programs: food stamps (93%), AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) (85%), public housing (85%), WIC (the Women, Infants, and Children program) (72%), the school lunch program (62%) and Medicaid (60%). Most did not regard Supplemental Security Income (SSI), the federal cash assistance program for the aged, blind, and disabled, as welfare. These six major programs labelled by the public as welfare make up 10.2 percent of the 1993 budget, ranking behind defense (21%) and Social Security (21%), and equal to Medicare (10.2%).

State and Federal Roles

The public wants to see the states play a major role in welfare reform. Given four choices, a majority (52%) thought government officials should experiment with reform at the state level, compared to 29 percent who preferred reform at the national level, 7 percent who wanted to leave welfare as it is, and 6 percent who would prefer to eliminate all welfare benefits.

But Americans are wary of letting states determine their own policies without some federal guidelines. While 36 percent thought each state should determine the best way to aid poor people, 50 percent believed the federal government needs to set guidelines when it gives money to states, in order to assure they will treat everyone fairly and do the right thing for poor people.

A majority of Americans (58%) also favor a "swap" proposal, where states would be in charge of welfare and the federal government would take responsibility for paying for the health care of poor people, instead of both responsibilities being shared as they are now. Twenty-four percent are

opposed, and 18 percent said they didn't know.

Core Beliefs and Values

Americans' beliefs about what policies and reforms should be enacted can be related back to four core values they hold about welfare and poverty:

1. Americans see the welfare system as doing more harm (56%) than good (33%) because they believe it encourages the breakup of the family and discourages work.

The overwhelming majority (81%) think that most welfare recipients are able to work. The idea that welfare discourages people from working was identified by half of Americans (49%) as what bothers them most about the current welfare system ranking far ahead of concerns such as costing taxpayers too much (14%) and causing families to break up (13%). Two-thirds (68%) say that welfare encourages women to have more children than they would have if they were not able to get welfare.

2. Most Americans believe the country spends too much (64%) or the right amount (17%) rather than too little (12%) on welfare.

They are somewhat divided in their willingness to pay more taxes or see other programs cut to provide job training (53% willing to 40% unwilling) and public service jobs (47% to 45%). The public is also split nearly evenly on whether people who receive money from welfare could get along without it (46%) or really need this help (44%).

3. Americans perceive a variety of reasons for people being on welfare, some rooted in individual responsibility and others in social conditions and lack of economic opportunities.

When questioned about possible reasons people are on welfare, most often rated as major reasons were: welfare pays better than some jobs do (71%); people choose not

to work (65%); poor education (64%); and women having babies in order to collect additional welfare benefits (62%). Americans are split on whether welfare recipients really want to work (40%) or choose not to (47%). More broadly, 38 percent believe lack of personal effort is the main reason for poverty in the U.S.; 42 percent lack of opportunities and jobs.

But the public also sees economic and social obstacles that prevent people from leaving welfare. The vast majority of Americans (72%) believe there are jobs for most welfare recipients who really want to work. But only 22 percent believe that most of these jobs pay enough to support a family. While 42 percent say "It's important for a mother with young children to stay at home even if it means having to provide her with welfare," 35 percent believe "We should not pay welfare to mothers with young children because it's so important that people work." The survey suggests that because Americans believe that both individuals and society share in the responsibility for people being on welfare, Americans' support for reform proposals may decline if they think that the reform will not lead to a minimal standard of living or will create severe hardship for families.

4. Most Americans believe that government and welfare recipients have a shared responsibility for ensuring that people have a minimum standard of living.

Asked who should be primarily responsible for making sure that non-working low-income people have a minimum standard of living, a majority (57%) said that responsibility should be shared between government and people themselves, friends, and voluntary agencies; 26 percent said people themselves and friends and voluntary agencies; and only 14 percent said government should be primarily responsible. Significantly, however, most of those who believe in shared responsibility want government's role to last only for a limited time (71%). Only 25% said government responsibility should last "as long as it takes." The theme is clear: the public believes that able-bodied people have an obligation to help

themselves, but also that government has a role in maintaining a safety net for a reasonable but not unlimited period of time.

Public Knowledge

With some significant exceptions, the public is reasonably well informed about the welfare system. For example:

- the public (90%) knows that more women and children are on welfare than men. (In 1992, two-thirds of AFDC recipients, or 9.2 million, were children);
- a majority of the public (57%) knows responsibility for running welfare is shared between federal and state governments. (Federal funds pay on average 55% of AFDC benefits plus 50% of administrative costs);
- a plurality (32%) knows how much public assistance mothers are receiving each month. (The average benefit in 1993 was \$399 per month for a family of three);
- seventy-one percent say that they know what Medicaid is and 43 percent know that it pays not only for hospital and doctor services for poor adults and children, but also for services for the elderly in nursing homes and the blind and disabled. (The public was least knowledgeable about Medicaid financing for the blind and disabled, the program's fastest rising major cost).
- the public overwhelmingly believes most people on welfare are minorities. (In 1992, 39 percent of AFDC recipients were white, 37 percent black, 18 percent Hispanic, 3 percent Asian, 1 percent Native American, and 2 percent unknown);
- when asked how long people stay on welfare, 43 percent said continuously until their children grow up, 26 percent said on and off until their children grow up, and 15 percent said a few years before leaving welfare for good. (Thirty-four percent stay on welfare less than one year and another 44 percent for up to five years. A majority of those who leave welfare return later to the

welfare rolls. Welfare dependency is characterized more by repeat spells of dependency than continuous dependency on public assistance.)

Methodology

The Kaiser/Harvard Survey was a random-sample, telephone survey of adults nationwide. The national sample consisted of 1,200 adults and was conducted between December 27 and 29, 1994. The survey was designed by the Harvard University School of Public Health's Department of Health Policy and Management and the Kaiser Family Foundation, and was conducted by KRC Communications Research, a national opinion research firm located in Newton, Massachusetts. The margin of error in the national sample is plus or minus 3 percent. The survey is the first conducted under a new program, the Kaiser/Harvard program on the Public and Health/Social Policy, designed to monitor public knowledge, values and beliefs on health and health-related issues.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a non-profit, independent national health care philanthropy and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. The Foundation's work is focused on four main areas: health policy, reproductive health, HIV, and health and development in South Africa. The Foundation does not support any particular proposal or approach to welfare reform.