



How Punitive Public Policies are Hurting Poor Families in Maine

Sandra Butler, University of Maine

Luisa S. Deprez, University of Southern Maine, Portland

Two decades ago, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act – known as “welfare reform.” This change in the nation’s approach to aiding very needy families brought stricter work requirements and time limits on cash benefits. It also gave individual states much more leeway to structure benefits and rules for their public assistance programs.

Welfare reform was instituted in response to widespread uneasiness about previous U.S. public assistance programs – and for a time during the late 1990s economic boom the 1996 changes were touted as bringing improvements for many poor families, especially those headed by women or men who could find jobs in that booming economy. But according to those who have monitored the wellbeing of poor families with children over many years, the evidence now points to many ways in which poor families have suffered in the new system. Since the 1990s, severe poverty has increased – for example, twice as many people are now living on less than two dollars of cash income per day. Many single parents cannot find jobs or must work at jobs that do not pay enough to support their families, leaving children without adequate care.

Welfare Shifts in Maine

As researchers who have been tracking welfare programs for many years, we discovered that for some time after 1996 Maine was able to avoid the worst developments taking hold across many other states. But recently, Maine policies have shifted in a punitive direction, with demonstrably dire effects.

Until five years ago, Maine provided reasonable assistance to poor families in crisis, helping them gain the skills they needed to achieve economic independence. The Maine legislature provided important transitional services to low-income working parents, including health care and child care. What is more, in 1997, with unanimous agreement on both sides of the political aisle, Maine became a leader in the nation through its creation of the Parents as Scholars program to allow thousands of parents receiving welfare to pursue two and four year college degrees as one way to meet work requirements. As our research documented, compared to others who did not pursue higher education, participants in this program were more likely to find jobs with wages adequate to make them economically self-sufficient – and program participants also demonstrated the value of education for their children.

But in 2011 Maine changed direction and started down a much more punitive path in policymaking about public assistance for the poor – with dire consequences for the whole state as well as many poor families themselves. Over the past five years, more than half of families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (or TANF), including more than 16,000 children, have been cut from the program largely through the imposition of strict time limits and full family sanctions. Tens of thousands of people have lost their food supplement benefits as a result of policy changes that made it more difficult to reapply for benefits and disqualified certain individuals that could not find work in high unemployment areas. Over 40,000 Mainers have lost health care due to eligibility changes to Medicaid.

The Harmful Impact of Harsh Policies

Since its welfare policies shifted direction, Maine has diverged from national trends in a discouraging way. While other parts of the country have shown improvement in fighting poverty and hunger, Maine has seen increases in child poverty, food insecurity, and numbers of children and parents going without health insurance.

- From 2010 to 2014, Maine saw a 50 percent increase in the number of children living in extreme poverty (subsisting on about \$10,000 a year or less for a family of three) – the sharpest increase in such dire poverty of any state in the country. As researchers have documented in depth, growing up in extreme poverty has lifelong bad consequences for individuals and their communities – consequences such as lower school attendance, more run-ins with the criminal justice system, and more joblessness.
- Among families with children eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families in the state, the percentage receiving help dropped from 60 percent in 2010 to just 31 percent in 2014. We did a study of Maine's strict enforcement of a five-year limit on benefits and found harsh consequences for the affected families. Many of those cut off experienced homelessness and hunger, often leading to family separations. Maine currently ranks in the worst third among all U.S. states in the proportion of children living apart from their families.
- Maine families are also experiencing increased hunger – compared to the nation as a whole and especially compared to the rest of New England. Food security got better across the country from 2009 to 2014, but has gotten worse in Maine, which currently ranks third in low food security. Children in Maine are 15 percent more likely than their counterparts nationwide to experience food insecurity at some point during the year – and Maine children are 30 percent more likely to go hungry than other New England children. Yet during this period, Maine has cut down on enrollments in the Food Stamp program.
- Since the passage of the Affordable Care Act of 2010 – national health reform -- every state in the country except Maine has seen an increase in the percentage of people with health insurance. In fact, Maine is the only state that experienced a statistically significant increase in the number of children without health insurance from 2010 to 2014. Maine is the only state in New England to refuse hundreds of millions in annual federal funding to expand Medicaid.

These dire trends are all directly traceable to punitive choices by Maine state government. The harmful effects will hamper children for their entire lives and do serious damage to Maine's workforce, schools, and communities. It doesn't have to be this way – because revised policies could improve security for the poor and open opportunities for parents and children. Before long, hopefully, Maine citizens will revive longstanding traditions of compassion grounded in a shared realization that pulling up neighbors in need strengthens the community as a whole.