

## **Family Values and Valued Families: Suburbanization and Welfare Reform in the Garden State<sup>1</sup>**

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## 1. Introduction.

In the long roster of words abused in contemporary popular discourse and policy rhetoric, “family” ranks near the top. It assumes a special connotation when used to describe “values,” for it taps a visceral social construction of individual and collective life, of the proper relations between home and work, husband and wife, parent and child. Everyone seems to favor family values, but no one can agree on what a family is, or what value to assign to different kinds of families.

In New Jersey as in other states, this confusion can now be resolved by erasing the contentious word. Welfare has been reformed and reinvented, as Federal responsibilities have been devolved to state and local governments. And the social safety net has been fundamentally altered as part of a broad consensus on the relationship between individual and societal responsibilities:

Work and the earning of income promote the best interests of families and children;

All adult persons ... are charged with the primary responsibility of supporting and maintaining themselves and their dependents;

The level of cash assistance benefits payable to an assistance unit with dependent children shall not increase as a result of the birth of a child during the period for which the assistance unit is ineligible for benefits pursuant to a penalty imposed by the commissioner to comply with benefit eligibility requirements....

(State of New Jersey, 1997, Sections 1b, 5a, 7a).

The rhetoric is familiar to anyone who has perused state or Federal legislation on social policy in recent years. But New Jersey presents several distinctive conditions for the implementation of welfare reform, and exhibits unique consequences for the daily lives of poor families -- whether or not they qualify as “assistance units.” In this essay, I want to draw the outlines of this distinctive environment, drawing on urban geographic theories to understand empirical results from a set of surveys of current and former welfare recipients. The story is at once spatial and social: economic restructuring and continued suburban spatial transformations have reshaped housing and labor markets, presenting the working poor with new and shifting geographies of opportunity. In this context, the spatial mismatch between affordable housing and entry-level job opportunities imposes severe limits on the options available to those trying to move from welfare to work. In this way welfare reform exemplifies the worst scenarios of urban and feminist geography, as shifting definitions of welfare, work, and family collide with the demands of life in the accelerated “space of flows” of the turn-of-the-century suburban landscape (Castells, 1996). In other words: poor families remain trapped in poverty, but are now severely disciplined by the rigid time-space prisms that are all too familiar to the frantic, overspent suburban middle classes. Welfare reform imposes a specific set of middle-class values of work and family on the urban poor, but devalues the lived experiences of low-income single mothers

trying to balance home and work in the polarized housing and job markets of America's metropolitan areas.

The rest of the chapter is organized into five sections. I begin with a brief summary of the recent round of welfare reform that culminated in new Federal legislation and subsequent state implementation in the late 1990s. I then consider historical and contemporary geographical processes and patterns that have established the context for welfare reform in New Jersey; my contention is that any assessment of current reform efforts must be premised on an understanding of the geography of social policy and urban markets. In the next section we turn to an empirical examination of the situation for current recipients and those leaving the rolls, drawing on the results of a multi-year evaluation conducted by Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) (Miller and Gable, 1999; Srivastava, Liu, Gold, Countee, and Miller, 2000).<sup>2</sup> I then offer a theory of the "public household" to understand the challenges facing low-wage workers entering a metropolitan labor market designed primarily to serve the needs of the suburban professional classes. Finally, a concluding section ventures considerations that are crucial in attempts to improve the circumstances of low-wage workers and families in the dispersed housing and labor markets of metropolitan areas in New Jersey and elsewhere.

## **2. Reforming Welfare.**

In the last two generations, mention of the word "welfare" has been invariably followed by "reform." The term "welfare" is often used to describe two distinct sets of programs -- Roosevelt-era provisions for social security, aid to dependent children, unemployment insurance, and workmen's compensation, and Johnson's "War on Poverty" built around Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, and several related programs. From the inception of Johnson's initiatives, social scientists and policymakers have debated the role of public assistance in reinforcing what is seen as bad behavior. Reform bills have been introduced in every Congressional session since the late 1960s, in some cases departing substantially from mainstream principles of the day.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1990s, however, a newly-forged consensus among policymakers intensified pressures to change the terms of public assistance to the poor. In early 1992 the Bush Administration eased the rules for granting waivers to states, encouraging demonstration programs and experimental initiatives that would not otherwise meet Federal requirements. States responded with a flood of waiver applications emphasizing rigid time limits, stringent work requirements, expanded provisions for child care and other support to get mothers into the labor force, and what is known as the "family cap" -- restrictions on assistance when an additional child is born to a mother already on welfare. Four-fifths of the states immediately sought waivers after the Bush announcement.

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<sup>2</sup> I have been fortunate to serve on the Academic Advisory Panel for LSNJ's Work, Poverty, and Welfare Evaluation Project. All opinions and interpretations in this essay are my own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Legal Services of New Jersey, Inc., or its staff.

<sup>3</sup> In 1969, for example, Richard Nixon proposed the "Family Assistance Plan," which was intended to close the gap between low wages and the income required to survive above the poverty line. Working poor people would be allowed to keep more of their earnings without losing assistance, while every unemployed family of four would be guaranteed at least \$1,600 (more than \$7,300 in today's dollars) from the Federal government. Nixon's proposal provoked intense Congressional debate but ultimately failed.

As a Presidential candidate, Clinton declared his intention to “end welfare as we know it,” and his administration actively encouraged waivers and entrepreneurial social policies among the states. By mid-1996 there were more than three dozen approved waiver programs underway (Hombs, 1996, p. 6). The well-documented legislative negotiations after the 1994 Congressional elections, therefore, were the culmination of a long-fought struggle around the loose patchwork of social insurance provisions installed during the 1930s and 1960s (Staeheli, Kodras, and Flint, 1997). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 repealed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with a consolidated program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). TANF imposes lifetime benefit limits and requires that recipients be in recognized work activities within 24 months. PRWORA also transformed welfare from a Federal entitlement to a fixed block grant to the states, permitting considerable state flexibility in administration and program rules.

New Jersey’s implementation of the federal statutes was passed in early 1997, and includes a five-year lifetime limit on benefits, a twelve-month lifetime limit on emergency assistance (typically used to help homeless families), and a strong emphasis on “work first” -- getting recipients into a job, any job, rather than continuing job training. The lifetime benefit clock is not stopped for recipients enrolled in post-secondary education and training programs. Few of these provisions are based on social science research, and many are in direct contradiction to sociological studies of how welfare mothers actually make decisions about work, welfare, and childbirth (Edin and Lein, 1997). And in any event, welfare is hardly an attractive option. The program has grown increasingly punitive in recent years, and benefits have steadily eroded -- to the point that benefits are now only worth about one-third of what they were thirty years ago. Work First New Jersey welfare grants allow a maximum of \$424 per month for an assistance unit of three; in inflation-adjusted term, the corresponding grant in 1970 exceeded \$1,268 (NJ DHS, 1997). All of these provisions make welfare reform an unprecedented social policy experiment for the nation and for New Jersey. But the unique regional geography of the Garden State adds further complications.

### **3. The New Jersey Setting.**

Three national-level factors have been especially important in explaining how welfare reform has unfolded since 1996: long-term structural changes in the economy, a decade-long “Goldilocks” expansion with continued growth and tight job markets, and a constant resorting inside metropolitan areas that favors low-density suburban housing and job markets. New Jersey illustrates a distinctive combination of these trends, creating a specific regional character for the trajectory of welfare reform in the late 1990s. The state encompasses some of the nation’s oldest industrial landscapes, and served the twin roles of bedroom community and industrial suburb for two of the prominent centers of Gottman’s (1961) Megalopolis. For Gunther (1947, p. 598), “its axis is the shaft of a kind of dumbbell, of which New York and Philadelphia are heads; New Jersey feeds them both. It produces a greater variety of industrial products than any other American state, from steel rope to television sets...from battleships to silk to calculating machines, from gasoline to industrial tape to jinrickshas....” But by the late 1960s, global and national shifts had begun a long-run process of deindustrialization, and the Northeast’s aging capital stock and high unionization rates encouraged severe disinvestment and capital flight. New Jersey was particularly vulnerable, with its enormous concentrations of heavy industry in

Newark, Jersey City, Elizabeth, Trenton, Camden, and several smaller urban cores. Between 1969 and 1993, the state lost two-fifths of its manufacturing employment -- an erosion of some 380,000 jobs -- even as growth accelerated in services and the “fire” industries (finance, insurance, and real estate) (Hughes and Seneca, 1996, p. 50). Between the end of the 1960s and the recession of the early 1990s, manufacturing as a share of the state’s total job base was halved, while services nearly doubled (Hughes and Seneca, 1996).

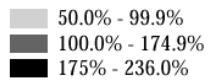
### *Spatial Restructuring*

Industrial change proceeded as the metropolitan economy continued to decentralize along major highway corridors at ever-greater distances from New York and Philadelphia. Jobs, housing wealth, and purchasing power have moved farther away from the region’s historic settlement core. Incomes surged in a few executive enclaves just a short drive across the George Washington Bridge from the wealth opportunities of Manhattan, but for the most part income grew fastest in a broad crescent spanning the state’s suburban growth periphery (see Figure 1). For Stansfield (1998), this march to the edge has turned the Garden State into the City in the Garden -- “the low-density sprawl of residential subdivisions, shopping centers, and industrial parks linked to the rest of the metropolitan area by high-speed highways” (p. 10). Affordable housing has not followed, however, due to national-level features of the housing industry that are exacerbated by zoning restrictions and discrimination in New Jersey’s fragmented matrix of 566 fiercely independent municipalities (Kirp, Dwyer, and Rosenthal, 1995; Smith, Caris, and Wyly, forthcoming). Low-rent units remain confined to aging urban cores and deteriorating inner-tier suburbs, and units with access to convenient transit are concentrated in the larger cities of Newark, Jersey City, Elizabeth, and Camden -- all places where poverty has worsened in recent decades (see Figure 2).

The scarcity of affordable housing in the suburbs has thus created a dispersed, automobile-reliant built environment that is hostile to the low-wage workers it needs -- clerical and data-entry workers processing invoices and complaints in scores of “back offices,” waitresses who serve the professionals too busy to cook their own meals, janitors who sweep the floors and clean the toilets in schools, office parks, and hotels, maids who clean the distant suburban houses of the wealthy, and workers taking care of the children of parents headed off to *their* jobs (England, 1996). In those parts of the state where rental housing remains relatively affordable, changing industrial structures have eliminated many middle-class jobs while downtown growth creates professional positions requiring advanced degrees and specialized credentials. Most of these positions thus go to suburban commuters. This spatial and occupational mismatch is well-documented in many American cities, but the process is manifest in a particularly vivid image in certain parts of New Jersey, where a postindustrial economy remakes the industrial landscape to allow easy bypass routes for suburban commuters, interstate travelers, and the thousands of trucks needed to keep the shelves stocked in suburban shopping malls. This process is a central theme in several streams of research in human geography, perhaps best captured in Knox’s (1991, 1993) work on “the restless urban landscape,” Castell’s (1996) “space of flows,” Wrigley and Lowe’s (1996) work on the “new retail geography,” or Harvey’s (2000) critique of the “developer’s utopia” in downtown Baltimore.

**Figure 1. New Jersey's Expanding Wealth Crescent.**

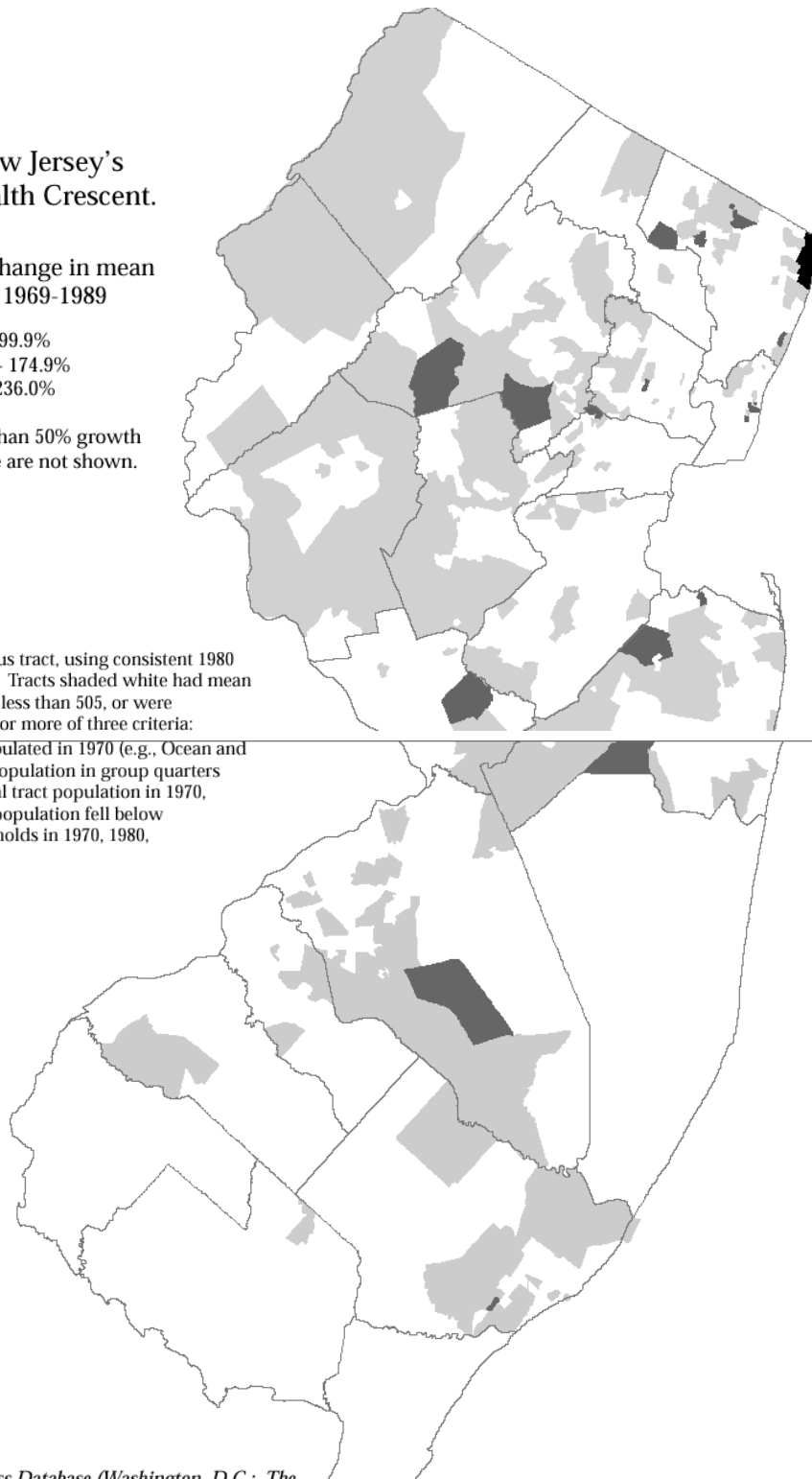
Inflation-adjusted change in mean family income, 1969-1989



Note: tracts with less than 50% growth in mean family income are not shown.

Data are tabulated by census tract, using consistent 1980 tract boundary definitions. Tracts shaded white had mean family income increases of less than 50%, or were excluded according to one or more of three criteria:

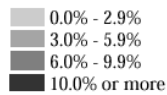
- 1) Tract data were not tabulated in 1970 (e.g., Ocean and Cape May counties);
- 2) Population in group quarters exceeded 5 percent of total tract population in 1970, 1980, or 1990; or
- 3) Tract population fell below 500 persons or 100 households in 1970, 1980, or 1990.



Data Source: Urban Underclass Database (Washington, D.C.: The

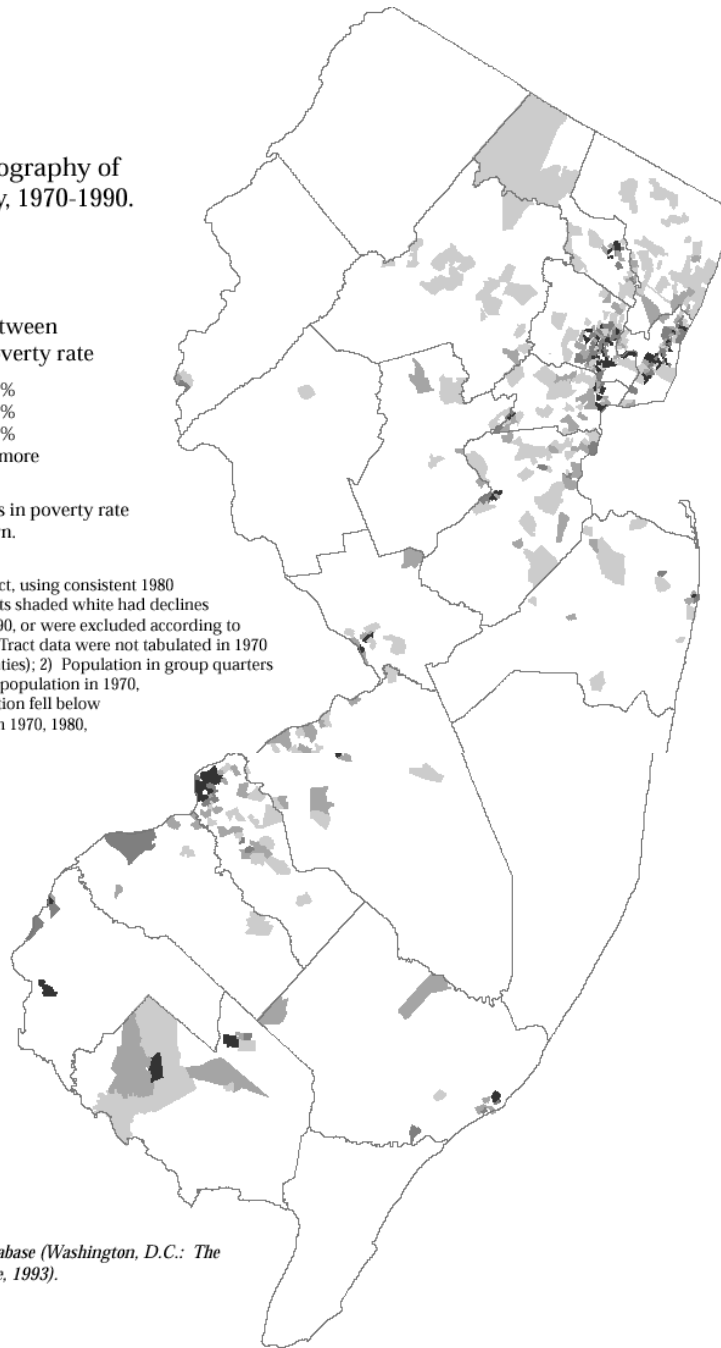
Figure 2. The Geography of Deepening Poverty, 1970-1990.

Difference between  
1990 and 1970 poverty rate



Note: tracts with decreases in poverty rate  
are not shown.

Data are tabulated by census tract, using consistent 1980 tract boundary definitions. Tracts shaded white had declines in poverty between 1970 and 1990, or were excluded according to one or more of these criteria: 1) Tract data were not tabulated in 1970 (e.g., Ocean and Cape May counties); 2) Population in group quarters exceeded 5 percent of total tract population in 1970, 1980, or 1990; or 3) Tract population fell below 500 persons or 100 households in 1970, 1980, or 1990.



Data Source: *Urban Underclass Database (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1993).*

But for many who visit New Jersey, the process is more subjective and visceral, deduced from impressions when taking a taxicab from Newark International Airport along the New Jersey Turnpike. One of the characters in DeLillo's (1997, p. 183) magisterial novel *Underworld* traces the route:

“He drove along turnpikes and skyways, seeing Manhattan come and go in a valium sunset, smoky and golden. The car wobbled in the sound booms of highballing trucks, drivers perched in tall cabs with food, drink, dope, and pornography, and the rigs seemed to draw the little car down the pike in their sheering wind. He drove past enormous tank farms, squat white cylinders arrayed across the swampland, and he saw white dome tanks in smaller groupings and long lines of tank cars rolling down the tracks. He went past power pylons with their spindly arms akimbo. He drove into the spewing smoke of acres of burning truck tires and the planes descended and the transit cranes stood in rows at the marine terminal and he saw billboards for Hertz and Avis and Chevy Blazer, for Marlboro, Continental and Goodyear, and he realized that all the things around him, the planes taking off and landing, the streaking cars, the tires on the cars, the cigarettes that the drivers of the cars were dousing in their ashtrays -- all these were on the billboards around him, so systematically linked in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an inescapability, as if the billboards were generating reality....”

DeLillo's image is a playful caricature, but Holcomb's (1992) more sympathetic portrait is an equally compelling account of the ills of deindustrialization and suburbanization. The “neighborhoods over which the turnpike flies on its often elevated route are home to stoic metalworkers, hopeless crack addicts, enduring matriarchs, and children with dreams and nightmares. Their homes are dilapidated terraces and six-story walkups. But from the turnpike the conspicuous spires of churches loom: their original congregations suburbanized, they run outreach programs for addicts, child abusers, and simply lonely people” (Holcomb, 1992, p. 438).

This landscape presents a stark illustration of many of the processes documented in contemporary economic geography. The service economy has flowered while the disappearance of unionized jobs in manufacturing closed off opportunities for advancement among unskilled workers, who had benefitted from the well-defined career ladders and negotiated wage increases of the 1950s and 1960s. The expansion of service-sector employment created a far more polarized job distribution, split between high-status professional positions and an expanded list of poorly-paid service jobs with low pay, minimal benefits, poor job security, and few prospects for career advancement (Peck, 1996). And as labor demand changed, so did labor supply. Women, racial and ethnic minorities, and newly-arrived immigrants comprise a growing share of the workforce nationally and in New Jersey. Nationally, female labor force participation rates doubled between 1950 and 1990, and for mothers with children under age three, participation has nearly doubled in the last twenty years (to 61% in 1995) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). Of the ten occupational titles with the largest projected job growth between 1994 and 2005, half are “pink-collar” (with females accounting for more than three-quarters of all workers): cashiers; waiters and waitresses; registered nurses; home health aides; and nursing aides, orderlies, and attendants (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). These labor market transformations have perpetuated or even worsened inequality. Although New Jersey is one of the nation's wealthiest

states,<sup>4</sup> it is also especially polarized. The Newark metropolitan area posts the most extreme suburb-to-city income disparity of any large U.S. city (Wyly, Glickman, and Lahr, 1998). Although the 1980s brought long-overdue increases in median hourly wages for women and minorities, the first half of the 1990s reduced earnings for all race and gender groups -- with especially severe losses for African Americans and Latinos (see Table 1) (McCall and Parker, 1997). Between 1990 and 1995, the fraction of all jobs in the state paying only a “poverty wage” (less than \$7.49 per hour in 1995 dollars) increased from 16.2 percent to 20.7 percent, while there were slight declines in the proportion of jobs classified as “decent wage” or “good wage” (those paying \$7.50 to \$14.97 per hour, and over \$14.97 per hour, respectively) (McCall and Parker, 1997, p. 23).<sup>5</sup> More than a quarter of all African American women, and more than two-fifths of Latinas, worked in poverty wage jobs in 1995 (McCall and Parker, 1997, p. 23).

### *The Recovery of the 1990s*

By the middle of the decade, however, the sustained national recovery had gathered momentum in the New York region, again altering the context for the working poor and welfare reform. James Hughes and Joseph Seneca, the most prominent and seasoned observers of New Jersey’s economy, have chronicled the expansion since May, 1992 with a series of progressively vivid metaphors; by early 1999 they dubbed the recovery a “bionic” expansion that is “still steamrolling every economic bump in sight” (Hughes and Seneca, 1999, p. 1). By the close of 1998 the recovery had added 384,800 jobs in the state, well beyond replacement of the 258,600 lost in the 1989-1992 recession, and the state unemployment rate fell to 4.4 percent. For the professional middle classes, this sustained suburban job growth has replaced economic anxiety with “quality of life” concerns, as “commutation, congestion, and employment growth set all-time records monthly” (Hughes and Seneca, 1999, p. 4). And the long boom has provided a similarly mixed blessing to low- and moderate-income residents. The tight labor market has pulled groups at the end of the labor queue into employment, although many of these jobs provide insufficient earnings to support families in the region’s expensive housing market. All of these factors shaped the context for Work First New Jersey, which took effect in January, 1997. By all accounts, the worst fears of widespread homelessness and hunger have not been realized; but neither has the program moved welfare recipients out of poverty (nor was it intended to). What it has done is to push more than 30,000 families, most of them single mothers, into a tight job market that nevertheless offers unskilled workers a limited choice of low-wage positions with few benefits and little prospect for advancement.

## **4. Life After Welfare.**

What has welfare reform accomplished? Has it succeeded in getting former recipients into paid jobs, and, if so, how has life changed for former recipients? To answer these questions, the Poverty Research Institute of Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) undertook a multi-year

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<sup>4</sup> New Jersey and Connecticut jockey for the first-ranked position, depending on the particular indicator used. Connecticut leads in terms of per capita income, while New Jersey leads in average household income.

<sup>5</sup> McCall and Parker (1997) define these categories on the basis of the national poverty line. A worker must earn \$7.49 per hour on a full-time, year-round basis to lift a family of four above the national poverty line in 1995. “Good” wages are defined as 200 percent of the poverty level, while “decent” wages are defined as earnings between these two extremes.

evaluation of Work First New Jersey (Miller and Gable, 1999; Srivastava, Liu, Gold, Countee, and Miller, 2000). LSNJ drew random samples from the case files of the New Jersey Department of Human Services database, and used trained interviewers conducting telephone and in-person surveys. To date, LSNJ has completed three surveys, each with distinct purposes and slightly different sets of questions: one survey focused on *current recipients* as of July, 1998; a survey of *former recipients* was restricted to households whom the state reported as having lost their benefits sometime during September, 1998; and a survey of *long-term recipients* focused on households who, as of August, 1999, had received at least two consecutive years of welfare since the implementation of Work First New Jersey. Although some features of these surveys are not directly comparable, the baseline demographic characteristics of the sample respondents are generally in line with the state's aggregate figures (see Table 2). Almost all recipients are women, and most are African American or Latina; almost half of current recipients have less than a high school equivalent education; and a large number have responsibilities for three or more children. By piecing together the cross-tabulations from these three surveys, we can sketch an outline of the circumstances for welfare recipients (and former recipients) under the new state policies.

<b>Table 1. Median Hourly Wages by Gender and Race,</b>						
<b>New Jersey, 1980-1995.</b>						
	<b>Men</b>			<b>Women</b>		
	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>
<b>Whites</b>	15.93	16.77	15.85	9.52	11.7	11.95
<b>African-Americans</b>	12.34	11.71	11.00	9.33	10.1	10.00
<b>Latinos and Latinas</b>	12.52	12.36	10.42	8.80	9.76	9.00
<b>Note: all values are expressed in constant, 1995 dollars</b>						
<i>Source: McCall and Parker's (1997) analysis of Current Population Survey files</i>						

When measured on the simplest policy benchmark -- the connotation-laden "caseload" -- Work First New Jersey at first appears to be an unqualified success. Between January, 1993 and December, 1998, the total number of Aid to Families with Dependent Children/Work First New Jersey recipients fell by 46 percent, equivalent to almost 58,000 families leaving public assistance. Evidence from the surveys points to other positive outcomes. More than nine-tenths of current WFNJ recipients report that they are interested in working, and nine-tenths express interest in attaining more education; more than a quarter of current recipients report that they would like to complete a GED or high school diploma, while another 28 percent express interest in obtaining a college degree. Survey questions concerning recipients' perspectives and outlook also seem to validate the program emphasis on work and personal responsibility. Almost two-thirds of current WFNJ recipients agree with the statement that during the past year they have been better role models for their children; one-half agree that, based on their experiences with

Work First during the previous year, they have an improved self-image; and more than 70 percent agree that they are likely to have a job and be off welfare within the next year. These findings imply that the welfare system has made clear its expectations of families receiving public assistance -- and that current welfare recipients have hope and determination to make their way off public assistance and out of poverty.

**Table 2.** Profile of the LSNJSurveys of Welfare Recipients in New Jersey.

	Current Recipients*	Former Recipients**	Long-Term Recipients***
Number of survey respondents	407	498	334
Female	97.1%	94.4%	98.0%
Age 18-25	25.1%	25.2%	
Age 26-40	60.2%	61.9%	
Median Age			34
Median annual income			\$8,688
Single (includes separated, widowed, or divorced)	95.1%	91.2%	
Less than high school equivalent education	46.7%	32.7%	47.0%
African American	57.4%	59.3%	62.0%
Hispanic	23.9%	18.6%	27.2%
Hon Hispanic White	12.8%	16.7%	7.1%
Four or fewer people in household	62.2%	65.9%	
Five or more people in household	37.8%	34.1%	
Three or more children under age 18 in household	38.8%	34.0%	

\*Survey conducted between August and October, 1998.

\*\*Survey conducted between January and April, 1999.

\*\*\*Survey conducted between September and December, 1999.

*Source: Miller and Gable, 1999; Sivastava, Liu, Gold Countee, and Miller, 2000.*

The question of poverty, however, is critical: if WFNJ is judged not just in terms of declining caseloads but also according to the overall effects on the lives of poor families, then a far more troubling and paradoxical picture emerges. First, two-fifths of the decline in the WFNJ caseload took place *before* the reforms took effect in January, 1997 -- a clear indication that many of the program's outcomes may simply be a reflection of the unusually favorable regional economic conditions of the late 1990s. Although nine-tenths of all current recipients want to work, more than half of those employed after leaving assistance earn less than \$250 per week before taxes. Almost one-fifth of all current recipients were terminated from the program at least once during the previous year, and seventy percent of these households reported that they were not able to support themselves or their families without outside financial help. Of all current recipients who experienced a reduction or termination of benefits, two-thirds turned to family or friends for financial assistance to make ends meet; more than one-fifth turned to soup kitchens, food pantries, and homeless shelters.

The survey of former recipients, who had been terminated between three and seven months before the interviews were conducted, provides a more detailed picture of survival strategies. Almost three quarters made up the shortfall with earnings from paid employment, but

a complex web of other community and family support strategies also proved essential. More than half turned to some government benefit other than cash assistance, such as food stamps or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Nearly one-third of those terminated lived doubled- or tripled-up with other households to save on expenses; more than a quarter relied on gifts in cash from family, friends, or a significant other, and a quarter relied on loans from family or friends. Problems are also severe for long-term recipients. The transition to work is, not surprisingly, hindered by deficiencies in what is unfortunately reduced by economic theory to the notion of “human capital”: half of long-term recipients report having no computer skills whatsoever, almost half have less than a high school equivalent education, and respondents scored well below the general population on a widely-used measure of verbal ability. But WFNJ does not permit post-secondary education as an allowable work activity to stop the benefit clock, distorting the program’s professed intentions, and four-fifths of long-term recipients expressed an interest in continuing their education.

### *Labor Force Participation and Geographical Barriers*

Work First has achieved some success in getting recipients into the workforce or approved work activities. One-quarter of current recipients are employed, while another tenth are in a workfare placement; and, excluding those respondents excused from the work requirement, 55 percent of the long-term recipients (surveyed after the program had been in place for more than two years) are working in a job or workfare placement. Nevertheless, geographical barriers play a central role in the difficulties faced by low-wage workers. Several facets of this problem are immediately apparent from the problems cited by unemployed recipients (see Table 3). Almost half agreed that available jobs do not pay enough to cover the loss of welfare benefits and the increased expenses associated with formal labor force participation. But notice that the second and third ranked barriers are child care and transportation -- cited more frequently than skills or education as a problem in the transition to paid employment. These concerns are also clear when recipients were asked what support services they would need to get a job that pays enough to cover their expenses, or to keep their current job. Although half (50.2 percent) cited job training, even more cited transportation (66.9 percent) and child care (56.6 percent).<sup>6</sup> The frequency of concerns over child care and transportation is a vivid reminder of the difficulties of moving recipients into low-wage work in an economy marked by dispersed, poorly-paid jobs without ready access to public transit lines. Seven-tenths of current recipients rely on public transit to get to work, workfare, or a job search; another 8 percent walk. Only 17 percent of current recipients have frequent access to an automobile. Two-fifths of current recipients spend more than 45 minutes one way getting to work or workfare.

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<sup>6</sup> Beyond the structural problems of welfare reform in a built environment that is hostile to low-wage workers, the program has also suffered from administrative problems and failures in case management. Recipients are not always treated in a manner consistent with the state’s own regulations. For example, more than two-fifths of those needing transportation assistance asked the welfare agency for this help in the year prior to the survey, but only 57 percent of those asking received the service; three-fifths of those needing subsidized childcare requested help from the welfare agency, but only 55.4 percent of those asking received any help. WFNJ includes specific provisions for child care, transportation, and other work-related expenses (as well as a “Family Violence Option” or FVO waiving certain requirements for victims of domestic abuse), but controversy persists over the responsiveness and knowledge of caseworkers, as well as persistent information gaps in the availability of support services (Miller and Gable, 1999).

**Table 3. Barriers to Employment.**

<u>Barrier</u>	<u>Percentage of respondents</u>
Pay at available jobs is not sufficient to cover expenses	49.5%
Lack of appropriate, suitable, and affordable child care	41.5%
Lack of adequate transportation	39.9%
Skills or education is not sufficient for available jobs	37.3%
No suitable clothing for work	23.2%
Physical or mental health condition	21.2%
Caring for sick or disabled family member	17.4%
In school or planning to attend school	9.7%
No permanent home	9.0%
Domestic violence situation	7.7%

Note: N for all responses is 311 (unemployed current recipients who were not in workfare).  
Respondents were allowed to choose multiple responses.

Source: Survey of Current Recipients, Miller and Gable (1999).

Barriers to labor force participation take a heavy toll when recipients are "sanctioned" or terminated under the provisions of WFNJ. Although many of those leaving the rolls have found work in the formal labor force and have enjoyed increased earnings, many more have been forced into creative strategies to cope with the sudden loss of benefits (see Table 4). Not surprisingly, half of those losing benefits fell behind in paying their bills. More troubling, two-fifths reported difficulty in clothing themselves, while more than a third said they were not able to sufficiently feed themselves. A third were not able to sufficiently clothe themselves. A tenth lost their housing.

**Table 4.** Coping with the Loss of Welfare Benefits

<u>Consequence of losing cash assistance</u>	<u>Percentage of respondents</u>
Fell behind in paying bills	51.9%
Were not able to sufficiently clothe themselves	40.0%
Were not able to sufficiently feed themselves	36.9%
Had an easier time supervising children since leaving welfare	34.6%
Had a more difficult time supervising children since leaving welfare	32.7%
Were not able to sufficiently clothe their children	33.1%
Were not able to sufficiently feed their children	31.5%
Had more money for household expenses	30.6%
More than a quarter had been able to repay debts	26.9%
Had access to better health care	26.3%
Did not have access to necessary health care	18.5%
Were not able to purchase necessary school supplies for their children	18.8%
Moved to a safer environment	16.0%
Lost their housing	10.0%
Received help from a social worker, psychologist, or other professional because they were having a difficult time dealing with stress	8.8%
Were forced to place their children outside of their homes	7.3%
Reported that they or their children lived where there was a risk of domestic violence or abuse	7.1%

Note: N for all responses is 408. Respondents were allowed to choose multiple responses

## **5. Welfare Reform and the Public Household.**

Several streams of research help to explain why programmatic success (getting welfare recipients into the labor market) has not translated into parallel gains against poverty. Geographers' research on segmented labor market theory (Peck, 1996; Hanson and Pratt, 1995; McLafferty and Preston, 1992) predicts that employer hiring practices, worker job-search strategies, and broad forces of industrial organization will tend to slot certain racial, ethnic, and gender groups into certain kinds of jobs. The persistence of job "ghettos" -- occupations or sectors with disproportionate numbers of women or minorities -- means that relatively unskilled minority women leaving welfare will face systemic barriers to upward mobility. Similarly, geographers' research on the spatial mismatch between segregated affordable housing and dispersed job growth explains the persistent problems of access to suitable child care and transportation -- problems that are especially severe for minority women facing entrenched occupational segregation (McLafferty and Preston, 1996). But the most important explanation does not come from theories of poverty, discrimination, or segregation. Welfare reform is based on key assumptions about work and family -- and these assumptions are drawn from the experiences of the suburban middle classes. And so understanding the most serious challenges

to welfare reform requires analysis of the anxieties, pressures, and personal responsibility of the white professional classes in the suburbs. New Jersey presents a textbook case of these dilemmas.

### *Suburbanization and Women's Employment*

For more than fifty years, two trends have continued unabated in the suburbanization of American cities: the increasing employment of women, and the expansion of low-density suburbs of detached, single-family homes accessible only by private automobile. These trends are not unrelated. While female labor force participation was once highest in the racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods of the inner city, today it is usually highest in predominantly white upper-middle class suburbs. For neighborhoods with significant numbers of families with children, fortunes have been increasingly related to the employment status of mothers. Nationally, between 1970 and 1995 inflation-adjusted median income grew by 23.2 percent for married-couple families in which the wife entered the paid labor force. Income stagnated or declined for all other family types. Among families in which the wife remained out of the paid labor force, real income eroded by 5.7 percent -- and, in any case, these families account for a shrinking fraction of all households (now barely one-fifth), and are vastly outnumbered by dual-earner families (32.9 million to 21.0 million). In 1998, for the first time since the Census Bureau began monitoring the trends, families with two working parents became the majority among married couples with children (Lewin, 2000). The "traditional" nuclear family in which the husband works full-time and the wife stays home with a child now accounts for only 5.2 percent of all households. Only one out of twenty American households now conforms to the standard by which "family" has been implicitly defined in public discourse and social policy. Household arrangements are now marked by difference, diversity, and change. And, increasingly, neighborhoods are defined on the basis of the link between resources and household composition: affluent enclaves of high-income childless professionals, upper-middle class neighborhoods where mothers and fathers rely on two incomes to pay the costs of raising a family in suburbia, and urban neighborhoods where all families (traditional, non-traditional, and extended) get by on unstable jobs and low incomes.<sup>7</sup>

Many subsidies help to sustain the costly and inefficient "American Dream" of the single-family suburban house, but individuals still must adapt to this landscape by altering important aspects of their lives. This is the key contradiction that changes the relationship between work and family. Suburban growth is heavily subsidized by unpaid or poorly-paid labor for domestic responsibilities: either women are expected to provide these services at home for free, or the functions are priced through the market when households rely on two incomes to sustain middle-class living standards. The result is that suburban households are increasingly in a high-pressure dilemma between work and family life as they endure longer work hours,<sup>8</sup> lengthy commutes to dispersed suburban job centers, and the virtual requirement to shoulder the

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<sup>7</sup> All of the figures cited in this paragraph are taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census (1996), p. 471, p. 472, and p. 474.

<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s, the typical married-couple with children lengthened the work year by nine weeks of full-time employment, and the 1990s added another six weeks. The U.S. now has the longest family work year of any of the world's advanced economies (Economic Policy Institute, 1998).

costs of *at least* one automobile.<sup>9</sup> New Jersey perfectly illustrates the process, with its unceasing flow of postindustrial-era traffic coursing through the veins of a colonial-era road network. Rush “hour” has been replaced by rush morning, immediately followed by rush afternoon, evening, and weekend.

### *Different Families, Different Strategies*

Different households adopt different strategies to cope with these problems. For the upper middle class, income gains have been sufficient to cover increased transportation costs, and thus moving to ever more distant suburbs allows families to obtain better housing, more space, or both. But time pressures remain, exacerbated by the costs of child care.<sup>10</sup> Twenty years ago, Dolores Hayden (1981) described the situation like this:

Currently, more affluent women’s problems as workers have been considered “private” problems -- the lack of good day care, their lack of time. The aids to overcome an environment without child care, public transportation, or food service have been “private,” commercially-profitable solutions: maids and baby-sitters by the hour; franchise day-care or extended television viewing; fast-food service; easier credit for purchasing an automobile, a washer, or a microwave oven.

This process is best understood as a “public household” (Wyly, 1999).<sup>11</sup> The suburban middle class has essentially transformed the meaning of work and family by erasing the boundary between the household and commercial solutions. Every aspect of household and family life is now a candidate for market-driven services, and for busy two-earner couples these solutions are often regarded as necessities. The popular press is awash in painfully accurate metaphors for the kinds of markets that develop to serve the needs of busy professionals: not long ago, a piece in the Millennial issue of *The New Yorker* profiled the growing industry of “domestic outsourcing,” or, less euphemistically, “dial-a-wife” (Talbot, 1997). As a perverse, racialized reflection of the wealth created by the long-running stock market boom, in wealthy enclaves of Southern Connecticut the new symbol of status is not just a nanny, but a *white* nanny. Between 1992 and 1996, the number of people working in private homes as nannies, cooks, cleaners, and drivers grew at *five times* the rate of overall private employment growth. The problem is that suburban growth and development -- especially the spatial mismatch resulting from the massive exodus of entry-level jobs out of cities to suburban strip centers, shopping malls, and retail outlets -- threatens to impose on the working poor the same kinds of

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<sup>9</sup> The average American household now spends \$5,661 annually on automobile-related costs, including net outlays for vehicle purchase, interest or finance charges, maintenance and repair, and insurance. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1998).

<sup>10</sup> Expensive child care does not necessarily mean high wages for those employed as child care workers. The most recently available estimates put the average wage for child-care workers at \$6.12 per hour. Schmitt (1998). Dolores Hayden (1984) notes that “As recently as 1975, a day-care worker was rated in the national *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* as less skilled than an attendant at a dog pound; a nursery school teacher as less skilled than an attendant at a parking lot.”

<sup>11</sup> The term is borrowed from Daniel Bell (1976), who coined it to describe an ever-expanding social welfare state that was gradually taking on the functions formerly provided by families. Bell’s thesis was published, ironically, only a few years after what is now generally recognized as the high-water mark of the American standard of living. And the welfare state, at least for means-tested programs, has been steadily dismantled since the early 1980s.

time binds experienced by the middle class. The LSNJ survey results on recipients' transportation and child care difficulties confirm that this theoretical dilemma is now a reality for women trying to move from welfare to work.

Neither welfare recipients nor the working poor can rely on market solutions to solve the time- and space-binds of suburban housing and labor markets. First, the market assigns little value to unskilled labor. The Federal minimum wage, in constant 1995 dollars, declined steadily from a peak of \$7.01 in 1968 to only \$4.25 in 1995; recent increases (to \$5.15) put the minimum wage back above the depressed levels of the 1980s and early 1990s, but still below the rates achieved as early as 1961 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). For New Jersey welfare recipients, cash assistance is worth only one-third of its 1970 level, and the current maximum grant (\$424 for an assistance unit of three) is now less than the average American family's annual combined outlays for restaurant meals, alcoholic beverages, tobacco and smoking products, entertainment, personal care products, telephone calls, and reading materials (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1998).

Second, antipoverty policy is tightly constrained by the limits of low-density suburban environments. If welfare recipients are integrated into reverse-commuting programs to get them to suburban jobs, they must endure lengthy commutes every day, making non-work travel -- trips to the grocery store, the doctor's office, the welfare office -- all the more complex and demanding. And low-wage workers commuting far from home face enormous difficulty in the event of a family emergency, such as a child's illness or accident at school or child care, that requires leaving work in the middle of the day. These constraints are magnified for single mothers; middle-class, married-couple families frequently use creative tradeoffs and sequential scheduling to negotiate child care and employment responsibilities, but this strategy is unavailable to single mothers. These mothers must rely on extended family, community services, and other informal networks.<sup>12</sup> And so even if welfare recipients are able to secure suburban housing that is closer to job-growth areas, they instantly lose access to the dense social networks of support from family, friends, and neighbors that allow them to rely on non-market solutions. Not surprisingly, a growing body of research finds that recipients of portable housing vouchers commonly "recluster" in city neighborhoods, because people understand that moving to a suburban apartment complex will cut off these networks -- forcing mothers to choose between asking strangers for help or paying for babysitters and other needs (at wage rates that are usually inflated by the shortage of suburban teenagers willing to do these jobs).

This, then, is the essential paradox: the kinds of jobs that labor market processes slot poor women into (cashiers, fast-food workers, waitresses, child care workers) are often precisely those needs paid for by affluent suburban women with too little time to do this work themselves. Far from a Pareto-optimal<sup>13</sup> situation, this arrangement puts all women into a terrible bind -- imposing stress and anxiety on poor women of color as well as professional white women trying

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Marianna Pavlovskaya for reminding me of the importance of these dynamic tradeoffs. See also Hanson and Pratt (1995).

<sup>13</sup> Pareto optimality, named after the economist and sociologist V.D.F. Pareto, refers to an allocation of resources in which it is impossible to make some people better off without making others worse off. If a situation is Pareto optimal, economic theory holds that it is the best way to maximize overall societal welfare according to conventional methods of cost-benefit analysis.

to balance the demands of career, family, and the costs of the “American Dream” house in the suburbs. The great risk of welfare reform is that it will impose the stressful, dispersed life of anxiety endured by the middle class on those people least deserving of the fate -- low-income mothers who actually want to be with their families rather than pay for “domestic outsourcing” services.

## 6. Conclusions.

What if this is as good as it gets? In an unprecedented Goldilocks economy, welfare reform has succeeded in pushing former recipients into a tight labor market that desperately needs its data-entry clerks, secretaries, janitors, cashiers, maids, and child care workers. But these workers enjoy few rewards, and low-wage employment provides no certain path out of poverty. The demands of life in diffuse suburban labor markets distorted by spatial mismatch and automobile reliance take a heavy toll on the lives of workers and families. What can be done to draw a new map of welfare reform, to construct a geography that is truly human and genuinely urban?

Two considerations, it seems to me, are essential. First, social support services must be combined in new and innovative ways that circumvent, wherever possible, the tight web of market transactions. The state has made it clear, by slashing cash assistance over the past three decades and now imposing strict time and eligibility limits, that public assistance should not pay. But the jury is still out on whether formal labor force participation will pay either. The corollary is that as former recipients move into work, market relations will not allow them to solve the temporal and geographical contradictions of contemporary metropolitan housing and labor markets. The survey responses on child care, transportation, and housing make this point abundantly clear: for these needs, present constructions of market relations simply do not work. And so while there is some potential in long-run strategies through the market in the realm of production (e.g., living-wage campaigns, labor organizing drives, etc.) and tax policy (expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit), the immediate pressures and costs of living and working in the City in the Garden demand recourse to social and community sources outside the market. Nonprofit social service providers, community-based organizations, schools, churches, and informal associations will face ever-heightened pressures to combine different types of community support in ways that skirt or even subvert the market (Gibson-Graham, 1993, 1996).<sup>14</sup> Housing cooperatives, resident-organized labor and service pools, barter arrangements, shared automobiles, and similar efforts will be of increasing importance, although each of these approaches is demanding, imperfect, and sometimes of questionable legal status.

A second consideration involves the recognition that any assessment of welfare reform is inseparable from its geography. In recent years, sustained attention to the ills of concentrated urban poverty has implanted “dispersal” as the guiding framework for assisted housing policy (Wilson, 1997; Goetz, 2000). Paradoxically, the rhetorical and empirical weight of this shift have reinforced suburban resistance to affordable housing, because we have created a language in which municipalities are exhorted to bear their “fair share” of that which our research has

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<sup>14</sup> And we cannot underestimate the challenge confronting these institutions. Blank (1997) estimates that if these institutions are to replace the support for mother-only families that was formerly provided by the government, they would have to raise *seven times* their current levels of donations.

supposedly shown to cause a web of social pathologies (Goetz, 2000; see also Kirp, Dwyer, and Rosenthal, 1995). The dilemma is that socio-spatial proximity provides essential resources in the transition from welfare to work, and dispersal undermines these resources. It is indeed ironic that dispersal has gained currency just as scholars and policymakers have begun to recognize the importance of “social capital” -- the web of social ties, mutual obligations, shared understandings, and affinities that make physical neighborhoods into supportive communities. Ultimately, the welfare-to-work transition requires a renewed commitment to place-based community development that preserves the economic viability and social capital of city neighborhoods while reducing the hidden subsidies that encourage suburban sprawl of residences and workplaces. Otherwise, welfare reform will continue to impose a cruel burden on the working poor: in the struggle to balance work, home, and family in the dispersed automotive metropolis, they will be as anxious, frantic, and overextended as the affluent suburban professionals they serve -- without any of the benefits.

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