

## **Welfare Reform in Indiana: The Political Economy of Restricting Access to Education and Training**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article interrogates welfare reform policies that restrict welfare reliant mothers' access to education and training. It focuses on how these policies have been implemented through the Indiana Manpower Placement and Comprehensive Training Program (IMPACT), Indiana's "work first" response to women's growing experience of poverty. Using methods of inquiry inspired by Dorothy E. Smith's articulation of "institutional ethnography," a case study is developed to investigate the critical disjuncture that arises when welfare reliant mothers attempt to navigate these policies in the context of Indiana's extended political economy. It is argued that through these restrictive policies, welfare reliant mothers are forced into Indiana's unrelenting low-wage labor market, increasing the pervasiveness of poverty and further perpetuating the reproduction of inequality.

**KEY WORDS:** education and training; inequality; political economy; women.

*The President keeps repeating the "dignity of work" idea. What dignity? Wages are the measure of dignity that society puts on a job. Wages. Nothing else. There is no dignity in starvation.—Johnnie Tillmon*

In the epigraph that introduces this article, Johnnie Tillmon, chairwoman of the early National Welfare Rights Organization and organizer of the Aid to Needy Children Mothers in Watts, challenges the "dignity of work" thesis advanced by then President Richard Nixon in support of his Family Assistance Plan (FAP)—a plan authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan as the Nixon administration's proposed welfare reform initiative (Boris, 1998; Naples, 1998). Three decades later in his December 4, 1999, radio address, then President William Clinton in effect championed the principles of Nixon's earlier welfare re-

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form plan when he praised Indiana for being the highest-ranked state to earn a share of the \$200 million awarded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' "high performance bonus"—a competitive grant offered states as an incentive for reducing welfare rolls by requiring wage-producing work. According to President Clinton, Indiana had surpassed all other states in the category of "how many people they placed in jobs." In his congratulatory remarks, President Clinton commented that one of the most positive features of "ending welfare as we know it" had been the opportunity given "people" for "*teaching their children to honor the dignity of work* [italics added]." President Clinton also reviewed what he determined the broader "success" of national welfare reform:

Fewer Americans are on welfare today than at any time since 1969—30 years ago. We're moving more than a million people a year from the welfare rolls to the payrolls; . . . we have changed the culture of welfare from one that fostered dependence to one that honors and rewards work. . . . If every state had performed as well as Indiana in placing workers in jobs, we would have helped more than twice as many people go to work last year. (Clinton, 1999)

Like President Nixon's earlier proposed FAP, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA)—signed into law by President Clinton—centered on inculcating the "work ethic." Moreover, President Clinton's statements move to underscore the idealism of the traditional "dignity of work" thesis. Yet, when the premises these statements suggest are juxtaposed against the economic and material realities of welfare reform as they are experienced by welfare reliant mothers,<sup>1</sup> there arises a critical disjuncture. As Tillmon's assertion countered: "There is no dignity in starvation." This article explores the disjuncture between welfare reform policy and welfare reliant mothers' experience of that policy as it has been configured in Indiana, the state President Clinton deemed that most successful in institutionalizing the primary goal of PRWORA—"requiring work." This disjuncture is interrogated in the context of the extended political economy of welfare reform in Indiana, particularly in terms of state and federal policies that mandate wage-producing work in conjunction with restrictions on access to education and training. Because this disjuncture arises at the interface between the implementation of these policies and the everyday lived experiences of the women who are compelled to respond to them, the analysis is developed through an interpretive case study that focuses on

the experiences of one welfare reliant mother as she struggles to navigate the challenges that this critical disjuncture introduces.

### Negotiating/Interrogating the Critical Disjuncture

#### *Methods of Inquiry*

The analysis that is developed here is based on an interpretive case study that has been extracted from a broader investigation of the Indiana Manpower Placement and Comprehensive Training Program (IMPACT). Qualitative data were collected through fieldwork conducted in northeastern Indiana throughout 1997. The fieldwork was divided into two phases: First, beginning in January, a five-month participant observation was executed centering on policy implementation within the local institutional setting; observation focused on social interaction among IMPACT caseworkers, clients, and administrators. Second, after leaving the institutional setting, intensive interviews were conducted with 13 women who either were or had been IMPACT clients since the 1995 initiation of welfare reform. The case study that is presented here is drawn from observations of the interactions that took place between one IMPACT client and her caseworker during the first phase of the fieldwork.

The methods of inquiry used are primarily derived from Dorothy E. Smith's (1986, 1987) articulation of "institutional ethnography." In the broadest sense, the goal of institutional ethnography is to take "seriously the notion of a sociology concerned with how the phenomena known to sociology express the actual activities of actual individuals . . ." and to explore "how these phenomena are organized as social relations, indeed as a complex of social relations beyond the scope of any one individual's experience" (Smith, 1986, p. 6). As a conceptualization, "social relations" refers not simply to a series of social interactions: "*Rather, it directs attention to, and takes up analytically, how what people are doing and experiencing in a given local site is hooked into sequences of action implicating and coordinating multiple local sites where others are active [italics in original]*" (Smith, 1999, p. 7). As Smith (1987) notes: "The relation of the local and particular to generalized social relations is not a conceptual or methodological issue, it is a property of social organization" (p. 157). Smith has described "ruling relations" as that "internally coordinated complex of administrative, managerial, professional, and discursive . . ." ar-

rangements that “regulates, organizes, governs, and otherwise controls our societies” (Smith, 1989, p. 38). Smith (1990) maintains that accounts of social reality produced by governing institutions through ruling relations often diverge from those based on the actual and everyday lived experiences of individuals, creating a disjuncture between social reality as it is constituted through ongoing social relations and the objectified institutionalization of those relations. This analytical framework is particularly conducive to an investigation of welfare reform policies and their effects on welfare reliant mothers because it offers an expanded conceptual foundation for interrogating the contradictions that are inherent in these policies and for complicating the broader implications of these contradictions in relationship to the reproduction of inequality.

### The IMPACT of Indiana’s “Work First” Model

In the State of Indiana, welfare reform policies are currently articulated through the Indiana Manpower Placement and Comprehensive Training Program (IMPACT)—Indiana’s “work first” response to women’s growing experience of poverty. Like most “work first” models, the IMPACT Program focuses on rapid labor force attachment and is informed by the belief that the most effective way to escape poverty is by transitioning from “welfare dependency” to “self-sufficiency.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is believed that this transition is most rapidly made, not through education and training, but through wage-producing work.<sup>3</sup> Hence, IMPACT clients—the vast majority of whom are single mothers with dependent children—are “expected to seek and accept a job which can be secured with their existing education and skills” (Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, 1997, pp. 100–5). As concluded by Abt Associates Inc., a private research firm contracted by the State to conduct an evaluation of Indiana’s welfare reform initiative:

One of the most significant changes resulting from welfare reform [is] the shift in IMPACT program emphasis from education and training activities [to a “work first” approach] premised on the belief that work experience provides the best bridge to sustained employment. (Fein, Beecroft, Hamilton, & Lee, 1998, p. 7)<sup>4</sup>

As welfare reform swept the nation in the mid-1990s, IMPACT, originally a JOBS program,<sup>5</sup> was reconfigured to include a 24-month

time limit on assistance, a mandatory work requirement, and a progressive schedule of sanctions. In addition, to shift the focus of the IMPACT Program from education and training to “work first,” approved education and training programs have been limited to those that are designed to develop vocational skills, that can be completed within a 12-month period, and that can be directly linked to the prospect of paid employment upon completion. Higher education is strongly discouraged: Before approving a program, IMPACT caseworkers must determine that “completion of the Vocational Educational Training program *will result in no greater than an associate degree* [italics added]” (Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, 1997, pp. 1700–25, 1700–26). In other words, programs resulting in an associate’s degree can be approved only if they can be completed within 12 months, and working toward a bachelor’s (or advanced) degree is prohibited.<sup>6</sup>

Indiana’s welfare reform initiative was launched May 1995. Prior to this initiation, 66% of clients who were actively participating in the IMPACT Program were engaged in a broad range of educational activities that included attending college. By May 1996, one year after the transition to Indiana’s “work first” approach, only 28% of clients were engaged in an educational activity, a reduction of almost 40% (Fein et al., 1998). Similar trends have been documented in most other states and reflect a major shift in the attitudes of both state and federal legislators toward the appropriateness of education—particularly higher education—for welfare reliant mothers. Historically, liberals have focused on education and training as a means of reducing “welfare dependency” by reducing poverty; whereas, conservatives have focused on wage-producing work as a means of reducing poverty by reducing “welfare dependency.” As electoral representative politics has moved progressively toward the right, the latter position has gained increased support from both Republicans and Democrats at all legislative levels.

It is in this political milieu that education and training for welfare reliant mothers has come to be seen by many policy makers as a way to avoid work, rather than a way to prepare for it. As U.S. House Representative E. Clay Shaw, Jr. (R-FL)—often cited as the “father” of welfare reform—has explained it: It is wrong “to suggest that states should be able to pay for welfare recipients to go to college and call it ‘work.’ College (or training or vocational education, for that matter) is not a paying job. . . .” and “nothing does the job like a job” (1998). The case study that is developed below interrogates the re-

strictive welfare reform policies that these understandings have engendered, focusing on the complex of social relations that have been coordinated through their implementation in the State of Indiana.

*Restricting Access to Education and Training—The Case of Bridgett<sup>7</sup>*

Bridgett was an African American woman in her late twenties, the mother of five children. She had earned a high school diploma and had accumulated several years' previous work experience, though she had been sporadically employed. First contact was made with Bridgett when an IMPACT caseworker who was being observed (a white woman in her early forties) interviewed Bridgett to reassess her status with the IMPACT program. A preliminary conversation with this caseworker revealed that Bridgett had been an IMPACT client for some time, had previously been assigned to a number of other caseworkers, and had eventually voluntarily terminated all welfare benefits for herself (cash assistance, foodstamps, Medicaid) to avoid mandatory participation in IMPACT work activities. Bridgett had again applied for benefits for herself, which necessitated another intake interview; her children had been receiving full benefits consistently throughout this period. As Bridgett's newly assigned caseworker prepared for the interview, she browsed through Bridgett's case file. As she did so she remarked emphatically: "*This is a hostile client.*"

The caseworker drew attention to several forms in Bridgett's case file. On an initial assessment form, Bridgett had drawn large brackets around sections that queried clients about their personal situation, family problems, and family and community support networks; she had marked across these sections in bold print "Personal and Private," refusing to respond to them. At the top of another of the forms in Bridgett's case file, a former caseworker had noted: "Client is extremely uncooperative." As the caseworker continued looking through Bridgett's file, she commented: "She obviously knows how to work the system," pointing out the letter that Bridgett had written to give earlier notification that she was terminating her own benefits. When it was remarked that the letter was extremely well written, the caseworker responded: "Oh, yes it is. You can often judge from something like this how intelligent they are. In my experience, the more intelligent the client, the more likely she will resist." The caseworker also brought attention to documents that indicated that Bridgett was currently enrolled in a self-initiated educational program, though the details were not clear. As the caseworker continued to review Bridgett's file, she commented further: "I can see that she's attending classes, though, so she's going to school and doesn't want to be bothered with us."

The interview with Bridgett did, in fact, reveal that she was attending school. This confirmation immediately called forth major challenges in determining Bridgett's IMPACT status as the caseworker explained to her. There were numerous technical problems associated with Bridgett's self-initiated educational program that prohibited compliance with IMPACT policies, and Bridgett was quite frustrated to be confronted with them. When she was told that she would be required to attend a two-week, pre-employment program



focusing on the development of “life skills” and job search strategies, which was offered only in the mornings, Monday through Friday—times that clearly conflicted with Bridgett’s course schedule—she responded in bewilderment and anger:

“Life skills? . . . Job search? . . . That’s ridiculous! Can’t you see that I’m trying to earn an associate’s degree here! I already have plenty of life skills, and I already know how to look for a job. . . . What I need is an education that will get me one worth having! . . . I want something better for me and my kids!”

Many IMPACT clients are keenly aware of what they face in Indiana’s low-wage labor market, and some actively resist.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly true of clients like Bridgett who have a history of cycling on and off welfare, working low-paying, often part-time jobs for as long as they are able to do so, and then reapplying for benefits when a job is lost—often because of failed transportation, loss of child care, illness, or family crisis<sup>9</sup> (Edin & Lein, 1997; Spalter-Roth & Hartmann, 1994; Spalter-Roth, Hartmann, & Andrews, 1992). Often, IMPACT clients self-initiate into educational programs doing so out of sheer desperation, knowing that they cannot provide for their families on either the paltry benefits of public welfare or the pitifully poor wages that Indiana employers are willing to pay them (Ditmar Coffield, 2000).

Unfortunately, many welfare reliant mothers have been forced out of the programs in which they enrolled because they could not secure the state approval needed to complete them (Birkett Morris, 2000; Jackson, 1998; Johnson, 1998; Kahn, 1998; Kornbluh, 1997; Lackey, 1998; O’Neill, 1999; Pierre, 1997; Schmidt, 1998; Smith Madsen, 2001; Wright, 1997). As Smith Madsen (in press) argues:

Given the enormity of the obstacles faced by single mothers in the US, it is remarkable that so many have found their way to higher education. Certainly the numbers would be even greater if public policy actually encouraged and supported education as the route out of poverty. Instead, US welfare policy assaults such women with a *politics of deliberate discouragement* [italics added].

In the broadest sense, the discussion above illustrates Bridgett’s dilemma, a dilemma that evolved through a “politics of deliberate discouragement” to shape the parameters of the critical disjuncture she was compelled to navigate: How was Bridgett to gain access to the financial assistance and supportive services she needed to sustain herself and her family and at the same time pursue the education and training required to mobilize into Indiana’s living-wage labor market—a labor market that, without these credentials, would undoubtedly remain closed to her? In other words, how was Bridgett to practically accomplish (or become “hooked into”) the extended political economy within a complex of ruling relations that were institutionally defining it in ways that negated her knowledge and experience of it?

Although Bridgett had not reported work experience within the last two years of her initial assessment (since the birth of her youngest child), she had

accumulated several years work experience before this. In addition, Bridgett had self-initiated into a program at a local community college to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN), but because she would need remedial courses in math and English, she would not complete the program within the designated time limit. This meant, also, that she would be faced with work requirements of 20 hours a week. Already committed to a full-time, 13 credit-hour course load, Bridgett knew that she could not adequately meet the needs of her five children, in addition to attending classes full-time, completing her homework, and working outside the home. Bridgett was frustrated and angry to be put in such a position. As she stated with conviction: "I can't work some stupid minimum wage job and end up screwing up my chances with my schooling . . . , and I'm not sticking my kids in some fifth-rate child care center to do it!"

Bridgett's primary concerns related directly to meeting the short-term as well as the long-term needs of her children. Although she wanted to be employed and believed that wage-producing work could eventually improve the overall well-being of her family, like many other welfare reliant mothers (Scott, Edin, London, & Mazelis, 1999), she expressed "tremendous ambivalence" about what working another low-wage job would entail for her children in the immediate future. Bridgett's concerns were warranted. A recent study that investigated the relationship between welfare reform and child abuse and neglect by analyzing child protective services data from 49 states, including Indiana, found that mandatory work requirements were strongly associated with children being placed in "out-of-home" care. Moreover, although higher numbers of children living in single-mother headed households were not associated with elevated rates of neglect, higher numbers of children living in these households with *employed* single mothers were. Movement of single welfare reliant mothers into wage-producing work had the greatest effect on child neglect and a large and significant effect on children's placement into "out-of-home" care (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2001).

Bridgett's caseworker explained to her that as a working IMPACT client she should be eligible for child care assistance for her five children, though she would have to arrange the child care on her own. The ability to find an adequate child care provider that Bridgett could both trust to protect her children and, at the same time, afford, became the center of negotiations. Again, Bridgett expressed frustration and fear at the prospect of being forced to place her children in substandard child care to take a low-wage job. She recounted the story of an acquaintance whose four-year-old daughter had been molested by the visiting stepson of a neighbor who was babysitting "cheap" for her. Again, Bridgett's concerns were warranted. The State of Indiana provides for child care assistance at only 50% "of the local market rate as established under 45 CFR 256 for child care" (Pub. L. 46, Section 7). This stipulation makes it particularly difficult for IMPACT clients to compete with more highly-paid workers in a child care market where demand for quality care is extremely high, yet its supply extremely low. For example, in their evaluation of the IMPACT Program, Abt Associates found that in relationship to the availability of child care, 93% of county welfare office directors indicated that child care provisions in their area were insufficient to meet IMPACT clients' needs (Fein et al., 1998). Indeed in recent years, only 4% of eligible families in



Indiana have actually received child care subsidies, one of the lowest rates of state child care assistance provision in the nation (Blau & Tekin, 2001).

The State's demonstrated willingness to offer (though not necessarily provide) IMPACT clients with child care subsidies fulfills a justificatory role in providing a point of accountability for the State in relationship to the carework that these mothers perform. Although the State negates the value of this work by institutionalizing the mandatory work requirement, it also acknowledges the responsibility implied in institutionalizing policies that make wage-producing work compulsory for mothers. On the other hand, the State objectifies this carework, oversimplifying its indispensable contribution to the well-being of children, families, and communities by reducing it to a mere wage relation. Bridgett, like most mothers, understands the complex needs of her children and has acquired the specialized knowledge needed to meet those needs. Bridgett's caseworker, a mother herself, also understands the complexities that are suggested here, but once these complexities are objectified into the abstract concepts and categories formulated by the State, all other considerations are subsumed: mother's carework = child care subsidy. As Smith (1990) has explained, the mechanisms through which the everyday world is objectified "are laid down in and inhabit organizational forms separating those who theorize, formulate, conceptualize, and make policy from the front-line workers who experience the actual ways in which the organization interrelates with its objects" (p. 95). Once the child care subsidy is mentioned, all negotiations revolving around Bridgett's primary concern—the safety and well-being of her children—become virtually irrelevant (and immaterial); the caseworker promptly advances the discussion to the issue of moving Bridgett toward immediate "employment."

But Bridgett's caseworker, in fact, was not prepared to "place" Bridgett into a paid job—the IMPACT Program offered no direct job placement services—but into a Community Work Experience Program (CWEP)<sup>10</sup> where Bridgett would be qualifying the State for "participation hours" but earning no wages. Bridgett's caseworker advised her that once situated in her CWEP position, she could then be "searching for a paid job while simultaneously fulfilling [her] 20 weekly CWEP hours." Bridgett's caseworker also informed her that 6 weeks of (pre-approved) Certified Nurses Aide (CNA) training might also be an option for her and that the 120 unpaid internship hours she would be required to work—first to "prove" herself and then to fulfill the clinical requirements of the program itself—could be applied directly to her work requirement. However, Bridgett would be required to discontinue the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) program that she had self-initiated to take advantage of this State-approved CNA training.

As it became increasingly evident that Bridgett's options in relationship to both mandatory work requirements and restrictions on education and training were even more limited than she had anticipated, Bridgett became even more angry and frustrated, accusing the caseworker of deliberately trying to sabotage her efforts. The ensuing discussion quickly escalated into an argument with both women raising their voices incrementally. Bridgett finally demanded to see the caseworker's supervisor, but upon being told that the supervisor was in a meeting and unavailable, she adamantly refused to continue the interview, abruptly gathered her belongings, and left. At this point,

Bridgett's caseworker appeared equally angry and frustrated. As she assessed the implications of this encounter from her own perspective—wasted time and energy, an incomplete case file, and an indeterminate client status—she regretfully added:

And then they won't cooperate with us when we try to help. You can't take it personal. They either do something with the Program, or they don't. . . . You see what I mean with this case. You really can't afford to take it personal if they are hostile and won't let you help them.

### **The Extended Political Economy of Welfare Reform**

#### *The IMPACT of Economic Restructuring: Low Wages/High Insecurity*

The 1970s and 1980s ushered in unprecedented changes in the U.S. economy. By the end of the latter decade, the declining profitability of labor-intensive manufacturing had inspired a massive structural transformation away from an industrial-centered economy toward one that remains information, service, and finance-oriented. Many states, as well as regions within states, continue to experience the effects of economic restructuring as they struggle to transform their local economies. Because of this, most welfare reliant mothers, particularly those who lack adequate education and training, compete for wage-producing work in labor markets that are structured very differently and often much more uncertain than those available to most other workers, particularly those who are more highly skilled (Goetz, Tegegne, Zimmerman, Debertin, Singh, Muhammed, & Ekanem, 1999). This uncertainty is primarily the result of labor markets that have become increasingly more flexible and insecure.

In addition to paying low wages and offering few benefits, flexible employment is often characterized by high levels of casualization—work that is primarily temporary, seasonal, part-time, and/or contingent. Furthermore, casualization is often concentrated in sales, service, and clerical industries, which have historically employed large numbers of women (Amott, 1993). As McCall (2001) concluded from her study of configurations of inequality in the context of regional economic restructuring: “Gender inequality tends to increase among the least-educated in casualized labor markets as well as in labor markets with high joblessness. . . . Low-skilled women in particular are among the most vulnerable to new and deepening forms of flexibility and insecurity” (p. 137). Flexible labor markets are also characterized by high levels of competition, which, in combination with ca-

sualization, tends to depress wages, particularly among women, for they are often situated toward the end of the wage distribution (McCall, 2001).

Notwithstanding the evidence that no region has escaped the deleterious effects of economic restructuring, the Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Minnesota have been some of the nation's most adversely affected. Here, the interrelated effects of low wages, underemployment, casualization, and heightened competition in flexible labor markets are clearly evident. For example, in 1997 in these six Midwestern states, 1,380,159 unemployed workers, including welfare reliant mothers, competed for 355,871 low-skilled jobs—a worker-to-job ratio of about four job seekers for every low-skilled job (Kleppner & Theodore, 1997a). But when one specifically focuses on the low-wage economy of Indiana, the findings are especially egregious. Although Indiana's overall worker-to-job ratio was about three to one in 1997, when scaled for rate of wages paid (poverty level, 150% of poverty level, or living wage), it was found that only 16.9% of the low-skilled jobs available in Indiana paid even poverty level wages, only 6.2% paid wages 150% above the poverty level, and only 4.3% paid a living wage.<sup>11</sup> This translates into a worker-to-job ratio of 18 workers for every job paying at least poverty level wages, 48 workers for every job paying 150% of the poverty level, and 69 workers for every job paying at least a living wage (Kleppner & Theodore, 1997b). Thus, the low-skilled job market in Indiana has been an extremely competitive one.

The overall unemployment rate in Indiana fell from 6.6% in 1992 to 2.9% in 1997, the lowest rate in two decades (Kleppner & Theodore, 1997b). But when unemployment rates were computed based on the occupational categories into which most IMPACT clients entering (or re-entering) the labor market were likely to be employed, the unemployment rates were staggering, ranging from 10% to 30% in selected occupational categories. When welfare reform was initiated in 1995, 47.1% of welfare reliant mothers in the State of Indiana were already engaged in wage-producing work. Table 1 shows the percentage of unemployment in Indiana within selected occupational categories in that year, the percentage of low-skilled jobs per each of those occupational categories, and welfare reliant mothers' percentage of employment within each of those categories. As is evident, welfare reliant mothers were concentrated in industries that employed large numbers of low-skilled workers and reflected high rates of unemployment; half were employed in the service sector.

TABLE 1  
Unemployed/Employed by Low-skill Occupation, Indiana 1995

Occupation	% Unemployed <sup>a</sup>	% Low-skilled jobs <sup>a</sup>	Welfare reliant mothers' % emp. <sup>b</sup>
Sales	10.14	78.0	10.0
Clerical/Tech	11.59	74.0	15.0
Factory	33.30	60.0	25.0
Service	18.84	78.0	50.0

<sup>a</sup>Adapted from Warren (1998).

<sup>b</sup>Adapted from Kleppner and Theodore (1997b).

Although a discourse of “self-sufficiency” continues to punctuate the welfare reform debate in Indiana, more than 95% of the few jobs available to IMPACT clients do not pay a living wage (Kleppner & Theodore, 1997b). Recent calculations of a “self-sufficiency standard” for the State of Indiana indicated that in the *northeast region* of the State—the region in which Bridgett and her five children reside—an adult with one infant and one preschool age child would need to earn \$34,908 annually (\$2,909 monthly or an hourly full-time wage of \$16.53) to provide for basic living necessities independent of any public assistance. Included in this self-sufficiency standard were average costs for housing, child care, food, transportation, and health care. The health care cost was calculated with the assumption that an employee was being covered by employer-paid health care benefits with the employer paying two thirds of this cost and the employee paying one third—the average proportion on a national level. Applicable Earned Income Tax Credits and Child Care Tax Credits for a family with this profile were deducted from the standard estimate. In contrast, combined annual income from welfare and food stamps for this Indiana family would be \$8,928; the official poverty level income would be \$13,133; and the full-time minimum wage income would be \$13,389. But wage levels were not the only consideration addressed. As was emphasized in the comprehensive summary report of *The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Indiana*:

The use of income thresholds should not be taken to mean that economic self-sufficiency can be achieved with just wages alone, or even wages combined with benefits. True self-sufficiency involves not just a job with a certain wage and benefits, but rather income security for a family over time. . . . Central to these efforts are access to education and training, and access to jobs that provide real potential for skill de-

velopment, and career advancement over the long term. (Pearce & Brooks, 1999, p. 4)

Proponents of welfare reform across the nation, as well as in Indiana, often cite reductions in welfare rolls and low unemployment rates as evidence that the economy is booming and that welfare reliant mothers are moving into jobs and becoming “self-sufficient,” but these calculations tell a different story—a story of deepening poverty and growing inequality. In fact, overall family income inequality has been increasing in Indiana for decades. By the mid-1990s the richest 20% of families with children had average incomes 10 times as large as the poorest 20% and 2.9 times as large as the middle 20%. The wealth gap has grown by 67% in the past three decades. Between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s, the average income of the poorest fifth of families fell by \$1800; the average income of the middle fifth fell by almost \$2000, while the average income of the wealthiest families increased by \$33,820. The gap between the rich and the middle class during this period increased at a faster rate than in 49 other states (Larin & McNichol, 1997). Most importantly, income and earnings inequality may be a crucial component in the relationship between economic indicators and poverty rates, locally as well as nationally. Although there has been a relative dearth of research investigating this relationship, a recent study found a statistically significant, positive correlation between national poverty rates and measures of inequality that was consistent over a three decade period from the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s (Haveman & Schwabish, 1999). Hence, growing inequality in Indiana may be exacerbating poverty, even as it is masked by primary indicators of economic growth such as declining state unemployment rates.

Clearly, requiring welfare reliant mothers to compete in this deteriorating, ambiguous, often uncertain political economy without the benefit of adequate education and training is a social policy mandate that can be considered quite problematic, if not pernicious. Moreover, the premise upon which the State of Indiana has built its “work first” initiative—namely, that work experience gained at any job, at any wage, and for any length of time provides the best bridge to sustained employment—is not sufficiently supported by empirical evidence. Although welfare reliant mothers are an incredibly diverse population and any conclusions drawn in relationship to them must be considered in the context of rapidly changing demographics, many welfare reliant mothers are low-skilled women who are employed part-time in

low-wage jobs that very infrequently provide the transferable skill development or work experience needed to transition to stable, full-time, or long-term employment (Blank, 1995, 1998; Edin, 1995; Pavetti, 1997). Equally important, although the reasons are not well understood, the rate of women's wage growth for part-time work (average return of 4.9%) has been found to be much slower than that for full-time work (average return of 7.9 %), even when both are scaled over the same 52-week period. Welfare reliant mothers have shown even slower rates of wage growth with the differences attributable to level of educational attainment and geographical region of residence (Corcoran & Loeb, 1999).

Congruently, Pavetti (1999) concluded from her analysis of the effects of work experience on potential employment stability (defining "good jobs" as those that offered at least 35 hours a week employment and paid at least \$8 an hour and "bad jobs" as those that did not):

Any previous work experience increases the stability of a woman's current employment and the likelihood that she will move from a bad job to a good job. But the quality of the job matters. Time spent in bad jobs reduces employment stability—women who have worked in bad jobs are more likely to lose employment altogether or to move from a good job to a bad job. (p. 17)

In addition, Pavetti found that more schooling is associated with better jobs; women with college degrees are least affected by joblessness or bad jobs. Also associated with better jobs was having fewer and/or older children; living in areas with lower unemployment, and living in the Northeast, rather than in the South or the Midwest. Finally, in an earlier study that focused on the working poor more generally, Levitan and Shapiro (1987) established that "more than any other indicator, including demographic characteristics such as education or race, the best predictor of future status in a low-wage job is whether or not a worker is currently in a low-wage job" (p. 25).

The above findings can usefully inform a consideration of the wage-producing potential and long-term employment prospects of welfare reliant mothers in the State of Indiana. Abt Associates' evaluation of the IMPACT Program indicated that from a sample drawn of welfare reliant mothers who were IMPACT clients between May 1995 and May 1996 (the first year of welfare reform), 60% had obtained 12 or more years of schooling, and 40% had obtained fewer. In addition, the results of a May 1997 survey that was conducted in conjunction with this evaluation indicated that 56.8% of employed IMPACT clients re-



ported working more than 32 hours a week, while 43.2% reported working less. Clients also reported a high rate of job loss: Almost 35% of these jobs ended within three months; over 50% ended within six months; and nearly 80% ended within 18 months. Although most who left jobs did so voluntarily, only 17% did so to move on to a “better job” (Fein et al., 1998, p. 98).

Moreover, the wages these mothers earned were extremely low. The median wage was only \$6.00 an hour, and 15% earned *under* \$5.00 an hour. Predictably, the largest share of these working mothers’ overall income was still coming from welfare payments and food stamps. In addition to low wages, clients reported inflexible working arrangements leading to child care problems as barriers to sustaining employment (Fein et al., 1998). Although this evaluation does not provide a comprehensive account of the long-term experiences of IMPACT clients, it does begin to suggest some of the trajectories through which many of the employment challenges they face are shaped: low wages, underemployment, casualization, and often inflexible working conditions, all of which integrate to severely compromise the broader possibilities of their maintaining stable, secure, long-term employment. As McCall (2001) concluded: “The insecurity brought on by recent economic restructuring must be met with new and expanded universal and need-based institutions to buffer the dislocations of an increasingly flexible and insecure labor market” (p. 191). Unfortunately, Indiana’s IMPACT Program—with its “work first” mandate and restrictions on access to education and training—simply intensifies this insecurity through the institutionalization of policies that do precisely the opposite.

*The IMPACT of Economic Exploitation:  
Public Subsidies/Private Interests*

The critical disjuncture that Bridgett faced was inspired by welfare reform policies that negate the lived experiences of welfare reliant mothers, ignoring what these mothers already know of their own lives in relationship to the economic and material realities of struggling to survive in an unrelenting low-wage labor market without adequate education or training. Although the parameters of this disjuncture should now be clear, there are three socioeconomic trajectories operating through them, the coordination of which may be less so. First, Bridgett will probably be required to serve some time in a CWEP assignment where she will work 20 hours a week for an employer for

no wages because her chances of finding unsubsidized paid employment immediately,<sup>12</sup> and without the benefit of formal placement assistance, are negligible. Although volunteering one's services may be laudable for the woman (or man) who can afford to do so, Bridgett is a young African American woman with five children to provide for, has only a high school education, and will eventually be facing a treacherous job market that is prepared to offer her next to nothing. The justification for this arrangement is, of course, that she is "paying back" the State (and taxpayers) for the welfare benefits she receives, though this is more often implicitly understood than explicitly stated.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the CWEP assignment is ostensibly designed to provide the work experience that will eventually lead to a "better job," thereby inculcating the "work ethic." But Bridgett has already acquired work experience in several low-wage jobs, and she is fully aware that this experience has not increased her earnings potential, expanded her employment options, or improved the life chances of her children.

Second, now faced with a CWEP assignment, Bridgett may reconsider her demand to remain in the self-initiated LPN program and, instead, opt for the short-term CNA training that has been suggested to her. Indeed, she may be forced to do so if for no other reasons than economic ones. And, if she completes this CNA training and is fortunate enough to find and keep a job in a labor market with a near 20% unemployment rate, she may be a bit ahead of the game. Certainly working for minimum wage is better than working for nothing at all. A local hospital—owned and operated by a group of several insurance conglomerates—has secured a service provider's contract with the State and will collect several thousand dollars for providing Bridgett with this on-the-job CNA training. But first, Bridgett will be placed, most probably, in a local nursing home (owned and operated by the same group of insurance conglomerates) where she will work for several weeks (without pay) to "prove" herself. During this time, she will be hoping to gain "official entry" to their State-approved CNA training program.

Third, there are extra incentives for Bridgett to "choose" the CNA training that has been recommended for her. Bridgett, against all odds, has cultivated aspirations toward higher education. And this is one way, in fact the only way that she can have any schooling hours counted toward her work requirement. Moreover, she will eventually get paid for the latter weeks of her training, though they will be deducted from her welfare check; therefore, she will realize little if any

increase in income. But most significantly, Bridgett's transportation and child care expenses may be subsidized through the IMPACT Program, a benefit that could continue for as long as she remains on welfare and in State-approved training. She should also be eligible for Medicaid and foodstamps during this period and for 12 months of transitional transportation, child care, and Medicaid benefits once she reaches her 24-month time limit. On the other hand, if Bridgett persists with her aspirations to earn an associate's degree and become an LPN—an educational program that cannot be approved by the State because it is considered too extensive for her—she will not qualify for transportation or child care assistance in conjunction with her schooling. In addition, she will be required to work 20 hours a week, most likely in a CWEP assignment, the hours of which will not be scheduled to accommodate those of her “unapproved” LPN program. If Bridgett refuses the CWEP assignment, she will be sanctioned and will lose food stamps, cash assistance, and Medicaid for herself—a loss that she has already determined her family can no longer afford.

Although much of the preceding analysis is hypothetical, all of the potential options and outcomes explored as well as the obvious contradictions they evoke are grounded in IMPACT Program policies as they have been institutionalized by the State of Indiana and are being implemented under the auspices of welfare reform's “work first” mandate. Although Bridgett did eventually return to proceed with her intake interview, she did so only to clarify the procedures for filing a formal appeal requesting that she be allowed to continue her self-initiated LPN program. Fieldwork was completed before the outcome of this appeal or Bridgett's decisions concerning it could be known. But Bridgett's circumstances were representative of those of most of the IMPACT clients observed as well as of those of most of the IMPACT clients later interviewed. In one way or another, each of these mothers was faced with negotiating a critical disjuncture. This disjuncture coordinated the social relations in which their lives and their children's lives were embedded, articulating their needs to the objectified categories and concepts of the State through ruling relations that “hooked [them] into” the extended political economy.

Although ruling relations did not wholly *determine* Bridgett's options, they shaped the social interactions that transpired between Bridgett and her caseworker and were themselves shaped by the terms of both Bridgett's resistance and her caseworker's compliance. Congruently, the socioeconomic trajectories through which these so-

cial relations were coordinated both shaped and were shaped by the contours of the extended political economy. All culminate in ruling relations that engender a critical disjuncture between the actualities of welfare reliant mothers' lives and the social policies ostensibly designed to "help" them. In other words, this has been accomplished in the ongoing coordination of institutional practices, processes, and procedures (in this case, the formulation and implementation of welfare reform policies in the State of Indiana) that discount the value of the labor of social reproduction while exploiting the potential value of productive (read wage-producing) labor. The latter is reinforced by publicly funded subsidies that make it possible to draw the former into a customary wage relation. This transformation takes place as women's reproductive labor (indeed, as all socially reproductive labor) is progressively institutionalized into the extended political economy, rendering it first marketable and then profitable. Flexible, insecure labor markets, which often benefit employers at the expense of workers, facilitate this transformative process.

### **The "Work First Work Ethic"—A Conclusion**

Restricting access to education and training within Indiana's extended political economy further perpetuates the reproduction of inequality. This is accomplished by ensuring that most IMPACT clients will be dissuaded (if not prohibited) from aligning themselves with the most powerful predictor of upward social mobility yet identified—the acquisition of educational credentials. As has been shown in the case of Bridgett, this is being coordinated through ruling relations that organize into a "politics of deliberate discouragement." The emphasis placed on the inculcation of a "work ethic" through "work first," and on the "dignity of work" thesis that legitimizes it, does important political work in conjunction with reinforcing and reproducing exploitative socioeconomic arrangements. Through these ruling relations, active resistance to this exploitation is depoliticized. For example, Bridgett's resistance to welfare reform policies that were directly aimed at forcing her out of college and into short-term training leading to low-wage work was understood by her caseworker as an act of arbitrary and unreasoned hostility. Within this frame of intelligibility—one that unconditionally accepts the foundational premises of "work first"—resistance is impossible to comprehend as a strategic and reasoned response to the social injustice of economic exploitation.

All acts of passive or active resistance are constructed as counter-productive, often pathological responses to welfare reform policies designed to “help” welfare reliant mothers make the transition from “welfare dependency” to “self-sufficiency.”

Thus, even activities such as CWEP that require work yet pay no wages are considered a productive first-step toward developing a “work ethic” and enjoying the social status ostensibly conferred through the “dignity of work.” In this milieu, active resistance becomes not only an act of hostility but a deprecating act of self-denial. Subsequently, the potential development of politicized identities and subjectivities upon which a more collective struggle against social injustice might be based is undermined. The “work first work ethic” rewards complacency as it venerates a traditional “dignity of work” thesis, one that echoes the logic and rationale of another past as it provides a justification for forced labor: “*Work First Will Set You Free*. Yet herein arises the critical disjuncture, further circumscribed through the contradictions that Bridgett’s story has revealed and that Johnnie Tillmon’s assertion continues to counter: “*What dignity? . . . There is no dignity in starvation.*” And although we should hope to envisage a much greater possibility for social policy (and for social justice) than simply meeting subsistence needs, acknowledging the material realities of the extended political economy of welfare reform—their propensity for exacerbating women’s poverty, for increasing children’s vulnerability, and for perpetuating the reproduction of inequality—might at least bring us to some sense of where Bridgett’s “*something better,*” as well as our own, might actually begin.

### Notes

1. Throughout this article, single mothers who are receiving welfare benefits are referred to as “welfare reliant mothers.” This term was first introduced by Edin and Lein (1997) who outlined their rationale for adopting its use thus:

We have chosen the term “reliant” over the more commonly used “dependent” because neither welfare nor work provided enough income for families to live on. Because of this, all but one of the 379 mothers we spoke with engaged in other income generating strategies to supplement their income and ensure their economic survival. The one mother who did not, a publicly housed Boston-area resident, provided the quintessential exception that proves the rule. Her child went without food and adequate clothing on a regu-

lar basis, and she was in danger of losing custody of the child due to "neglect." (p. 6)

2. For early conservative analyses that center on naming, defining, and interpreting "welfare dependency" and on establishing a conceptual foundation for its discursive corollaries, "self-sufficiency" and "personal responsibility," see Anderson (1978), Gilder (1981), Murray (1984), and Mead (1986). Anderson's general conclusion was that the cause of poverty in the U.S. was the welfare system, which had "created a new caste of Americans—perhaps as much as one-tenth of this nation—a caste of people almost totally dependent on the state, with little hope or prospect of breaking free." He continued: "Perhaps we should call them the Dependent Americans" (p. 56). For a feminist critique of the discourse of "welfare dependency," see Fraser and Gordon (1994). For a critique of the discourses of "personal responsibility" and "self-sufficiency" with a focus on gender, race, and class, see Schram (2000). For a feminist analysis of the prevailing discourses of welfare reform: "welfare dependency," "self-sufficiency," and "personal responsibility" as they have been articulated through Indiana's IMPACT Program, see Ditmar Coffield (2001).
3. For a comprehensive overview of the differences between rapid labor force attachment models, which emphasize a "work first" approach to welfare reform, and human capital development models, which emphasize education and training or a "skills-building" approach, see Strawn (1998).
4. The U.S. General Accounting Office (1998) found that requiring wage-producing work in conjunction with restricting access to education and training was the most common program design implemented in most states.
5. The IMPACT Program was originally legislated under the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) component of the Family Support Act of 1988 (Pub. L. No. 100-485). As of August 1996, the IMPACT Program is federally legislated under the Block Grants for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provision of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (Pub. L. No. 104-193). At the state level, the TANF/IMPACT Program is currently legislated under 470 IAC 10.1-1-2. Indiana's welfare reform demonstration initiatives are incorporated under 470 IAC 14.
6. For an extended discussion of how the educational restrictions of Indiana's IMPACT Program in conjunction with work requirements, time limits, and the imposition of sanctions has affected welfare reliant mothers who were attempting to pursue a college degree, see Ditmar Coffield (2000).
7. "Bridgett" is an assigned pseudonym.
8. Based on an intensive interview study with 379 welfare reliant mothers and low-wage workers in the cities of Chicago, Boston, San Antonio, and Charleston, Edin (1995) found that "the women interviewed emphasized that they did not forgo low-wage work in favor of welfare because of their lack of experience in the labor force, but precisely because they had such experience" (p. 6). Congruently, Edin and Lein (1997) found that



“most mothers firmly believed that education represented their best hope of breaking out of the \$5-an-hour job ghetto” (p. 229). Rather than opting for any short-term education and training programs offered them through government work programs, these “mothers favored high-quality two- or four-year programs that prepared them for occupations paying a living wage” (p. 229).

9. Spalter-Roth and Hartmann’s (1994) findings, based on data from a nationally representative random sample of welfare reliant mothers drawn from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), established that 39% of those single mothers who were “packaging” welfare assistance and low-wage work were also students with an average of 5.7 years of previous work experience.
10. Assignment to the Community Work Experience Program (CWEP) is consistently used in Indiana as an initial alternative for IMPACT clients who have not secured unsubsidized paid employment. By assigning a client to CWEP, the State can count the “placement” in its work participation rate even though the client earns no wages. A CWEP placement can last as long as 9 months at a particular site, and a CWEP placement may be with a “public, non-profit, or for-profit employer. There are no restrictions on the type of employer” (Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, 1997, pp. 1700–16).
11. Kleppner and Theodore (1997a, 1997b) compute this “living wage” on an annual \$25,907 before tax income. Their budget takes into consideration average costs for food, housing, utilities, transportation, health care, child care, clothing, and personal care needs for a mother and two preschool age children living in the Midwest in the mid-1990s.
12. Indiana has incorporated an Applicant Job Search (AJS) component that requires making at least 10 personal contacts with prospective employers per week, starting from the day the client first applies for public assistance.
13. Although the connection is implicit, the maximum number of hours a client can be required to work in a CWEP assignment (up to the State’s minimum required participation rate) are to be computed by first deducting from the client’s financial grant any child support payments being diverted by the State and then dividing the balance by the federal minimum wage (Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, 1997).

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