Welfare agenda: Programs support those who work

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Last month marked the tenth anniversary of President Clinton's welfare reform law, which imposed time limits for receiving cash assistance and required welfare recipients—including single mothers with young children—to work. Highly controversial at the time, the measure has become so much a part of the political landscape that welfare now hardly figures as an election-year issue.

Even critics of welfare reform have had to acknowledge that since 1996 the number of working mothers has risen by 1.5 million, the median income of families on welfare has risen by several thousands of dollars, and welfare caseloads have been cut by 60 percent. Though these gains were often attributed to the booming economy of the 1990s, they largely survived the economic downturn of the early 2000s.

Other signs are less encouraging, however. The fear that welfare-to-work would not help the least employable—people without a high school diploma, those with a disabled family member, those with a mental health or drug or alcohol problem—has been validated. Mark Courtney of the University of Chicago, who studied welfare trends in Wisconsin, reports that after 1999 the proportion of applicants who were employable steadily declined. Nationally, the number of single mothers living in extreme poverty has actually increased slightly since 1996.

Furthermore, since welfare reform was enacted, the national poverty rate has barely been dented. In 1996, 13.7 percent of Americans were in poverty; the figure dropped to 11.3 percent in 2000, but moved back to 12.7 percent in 2004 (and improved only slightly to 12.6 percent in 2005). Since the poverty rate has not improved significantly even while the welfare rolls have declined sharply, it would follow that welfare reform has primarily transformed the welfare poor into the working poor.

Which is not insignificant. Transforming the welfare poor into the working poor is precisely what Clinton was hoping to do: he wanted to eliminate the culture of dependency and create a welfare policy that would elicit broad political support because it stressed the value of work and self-sufficiency. Americans, he figured, would be willing to lend a hand to low-income citizens who “work hard and play by the rules”—lend a hand in the form of job training, health insurance, food stamps, child care subsidies and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

But is that true? These welfare programs are periodically under attack by politicians eager to slash all public benefits to the poor. Earlier this year the federal government tightened welfare work requirements further and eliminated some education programs.

Welfare recipients have clearly proved their willingness to work. Low-income families now look very much like a great many middle-class families: they work long hours; they struggle to balance work and family; they worry about finding child care; and they lack health insurance. Americans have every reason to be in solidarity with those on welfare. The question for the next ten years is whether Americans will build on the success of welfare reform by supporting programs of education, health care, child care, minimum wage and unemployment insurance that protect those who work and their families.