

**LEAVING PUBLIC ASSISTANCE
IN WASHINGTON STATE**

Gregory C. Weeks

**The Washington State Institute for Public Policy
The Evergreen State College
Seminar 3162, TA-00
Olympia, WA 98505
Telephone: (206) 866-6000, ext. 6380**

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Executive Summary

Women in Washington State leave public assistance by a variety of routes. Family Income Study data from a three-year period provides details on: how often women leave assistance, how long they stay off after they leave, the reasons why they leave, and the reasons why they stay on.

How often do women leave assistance?

- From March 1988 through May 1990, we estimate that **41 percent** of the women who were on assistance at the beginning of that period left assistance for at least one of the 26 months.
- **26 percent** left and did not re-enter.

How long do women stay off assistance after leaving?

Of the women who left assistance:

- **87 percent*** remained off for at least 6 months.
- **68 percent*** stayed off for at least a year.

Why do women leave assistance?

A woman is **more likely** to leave public assistance:

- If she has **recent work experience**.
- If she **marries**.
- If she has a **post-secondary certificate or degree**.
- If she **lives in a household with other adults**, independent of her marital status.

Why do women stay on assistance?

A woman is **less likely** to leave assistance:

- The **longer she has been on** continuously.
- If the **assistance grant is a larger share** of her total household income.
- If she has a child under one year of age living at home.
- If she had her **first child as a teenager**.

Major conclusions:

- **Employment** is the most common avenue off assistance in Washington State.
- Women **frequently leave** public assistance in Washington State.
- Once they leave assistance, most **stay off**.

*corrected April 1991

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Many factors contribute to the processes by which women in Washington State leave public assistance. Longitudinal data from the Family Income Study¹ provides information on the patterns of public assistance use and the reasons why women leave public assistance.

Patterns of Public Assistance Use

There are a variety of patterns in the ways women in Washington State use public assistance. Specifically, for the women who were on assistance in March 1988:

- Over one-third (36 percent) were continuously on assistance from June 1987 through May 1990.
- 15 percent of the women on public assistance left and re-entered assistance between March 1988 and May 1990.
- 57 percent of the women who were on assistance in March 1988 had been on for three years or less.
- 17 percent of the women who were on assistance in March 1988 had been on for seven years or more.

The Family Income Study sample of women on public assistance was drawn at a single point in time, March 1988. It over-represents longer periods of assistance use and under-represents shorter periods².

Many women leave public assistance. Figure One on page three shows that from March 1988 through May 1990, **41 percent** of the women who were on assistance in March 1988 went off by May 1990. This indicates considerable movement both off and on assistance, since the number of cases did not rapidly decline during this 26-month period.

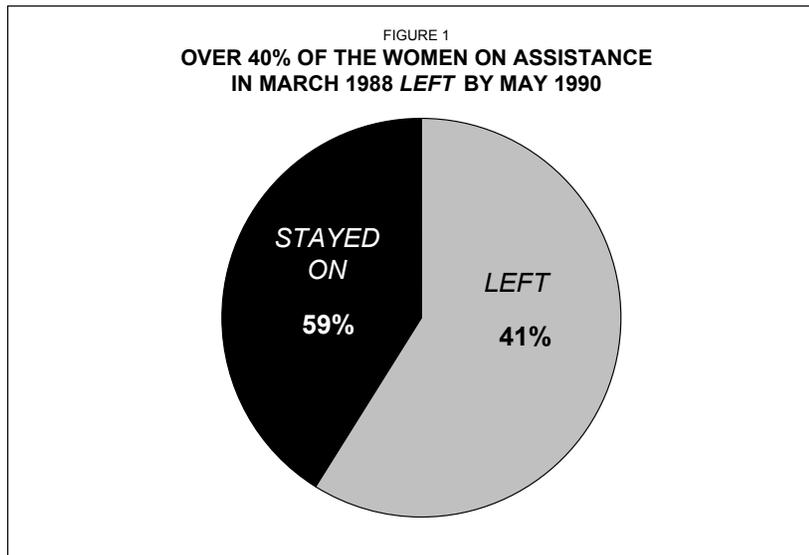
Women who left assistance had been on for a shorter time. The length of time already spent continuously on assistance affects a woman's likelihood of leaving.

¹The Family Income Study sample was drawn in March 1988. Monthly data on public assistance use through May 1990 was collected, along with detailed information on respondents dating back to June 1987. Accordingly, this paper utilizes monthly data from the 36 months from June 1987 through May 1990.

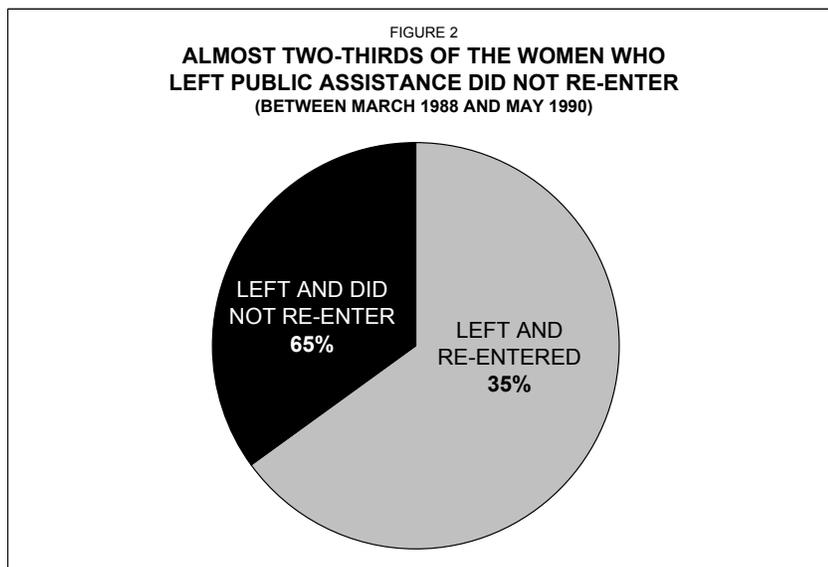
²This bias favoring longer spells is well-illustrated by reference to a hypothetical ten-bed hospital described by Bane and Ellwood (1983 10-12). Nine of the beds have new patients every day, while one long-term patient occupies the tenth bed. If observed on one day, the long-term patient occupies 10 percent of the beds, while if examined over a year this patient occupies only .03 percent of the bedspace. Similarly, a sample of public assistance recipients drawn from a single point in time shows a high proportion of long-term recipients, while a sample drawn over time shows a lower proportion.

For women who left assistance between March 1988 and May 1990, the median time for continuously receiving assistance is 28 months. For the women who **stayed on** assistance, the median time for continuously receiving assistance is 48 months.

From the research on length of time on assistance, we know that two distinct sub-populations exist within the overall public assistance population: those who use assistance for a relatively short time, and those who have a long-term, dependent pattern of use.



Once off, women stay off assistance. Figure 2 shows that women who left did *not* cycle off and back on very frequently. Just over one-third (35 percent) of the women who left public assistance re-entered during the 26-month period. The median number of months off assistance (out of 26 months possible) was 10 for women who left and re-entered assistance, and 15 for women who left and did not re-enter. Additionally, of the women who left assistance, **87 percent** remained off for at least six months, and **68 percent** stayed off at least a year.³



³The 68 percent that stayed off for at least one year are 68 percent of all of those who left assistance **and** for whom we had information for at least one year following their exit from assistance. These figures were corrected April 1991.

Why Women Leave Assistance

Three separate analyses⁴ identified many factors affecting a woman's chance of leaving public assistance. Below, the most influential factors are grouped into those that increase and those that decrease a woman's chance of leaving assistance. Hypothetical examples are presented to help illustrate the influence of specific characteristics.

A woman is **more likely** to leave assistance (most significant factor first):

- If she has recent work experience.
- If she marries.
- If she has a post-secondary certificate or degree.
- If she lives in a household with other adults, independent of her marital status.
- If she is divorced, as compared to being separated or never married.

Anna is a 24-year-old mother of two daughters, ages 7 and 5. She has been on public assistance for seven years and is a high school dropout. Anna went to a community college and obtained a G.E.D. and a certificate in dental hygiene. She is divorced and has recent work experience. She lives and shares household expenses with another single mother and her children. **Anna has a 69 percent chance of leaving assistance within the next two years.**

A woman is **less likely** to leave assistance (most significant factor first):

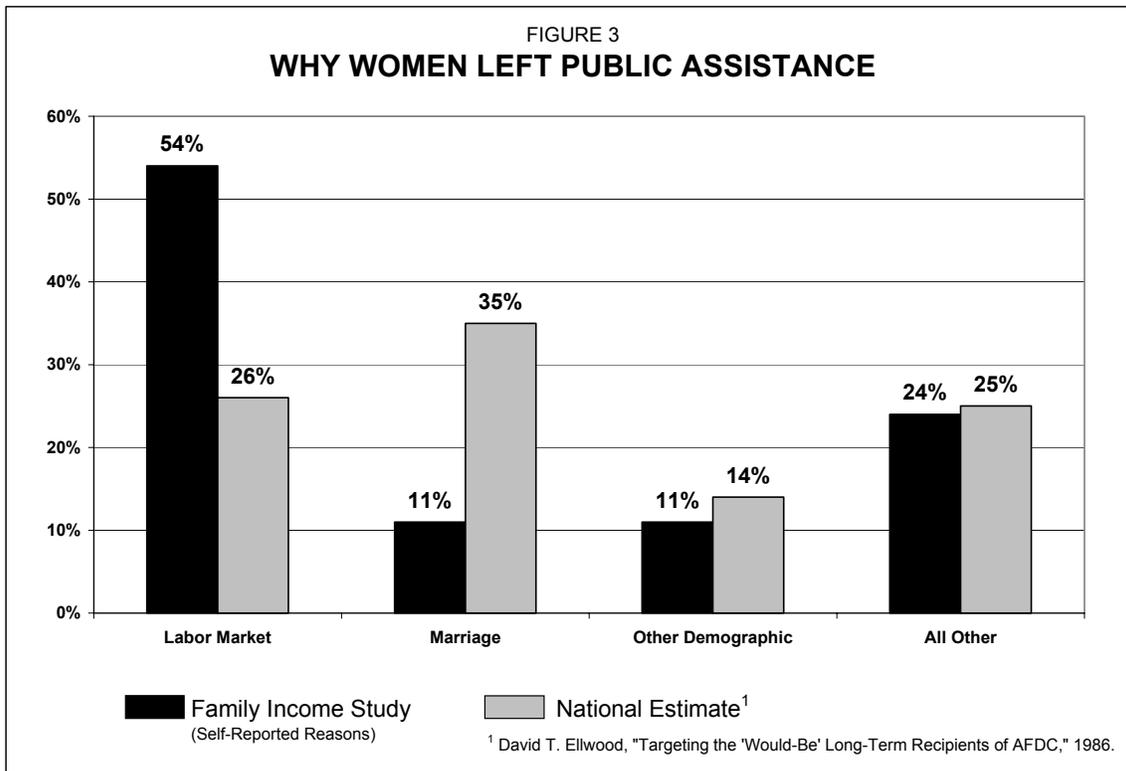
- The longer she has been on continuously.
- The larger her assistance grant is in proportion to her total household income.
- If she has a child under one year of age living at home.
- If she had her first child as a teenager.

Rose is a 24-year-old mother of two daughters, ages 7 and 5. She has been on public assistance since she was 17, when her older daughter was born. She dropped out of high school and does *not* have a diploma or a G.E.D. She is separated from her husband and receives no child support payments. She has no recent work experience. **She has only about one chance in eight of leaving public assistance within the next two years.**

⁴The first analysis examines the sample of women who were on public assistance in March 1988 (when the sample was drawn) to determine what factors are associated with leaving assistance. The second analysis estimates the likelihood that a woman who has been on assistance for a specified period will leave within the next month. This analysis uses all periods of assistance receipt. The third analysis is similar to the second, but only considers periods of assistance receipt that ended by May 1990.

The findings discussed above are derived from analytical approaches which attribute reasons why women leave public assistance. In addition, the Family Income Study examines self-reported reasons for leaving assistance by simply asking those respondents who had left assistance to describe what made it possible for them to leave assistance. Over one-half of the Family Income Study respondents reported employment-related reasons for leaving public assistance.

Figure 3 summarizes these self-reported reasons for leaving public assistance, and compares them to the findings of David Ellwood's prominent study of public assistance dependency (1986). The Family Income Study respondents' self-reported reasons for leaving focus more on employment and the labor market, and less on marriage, than does Ellwood's research. **For women in Washington State, the most important route off public assistance is the labor market.**



Policy Implications

- **Many women leave assistance, and once off, they stay off.**
- **Employment is the most common avenue off assistance in Washington State.** This is a promising finding for welfare-to-work programs: If public programs can increase a woman's earning power enough to allow her to support her family adequately, she **will** leave assistance.
- There are two types of assistance recipients: long-term and short-term. They require different types of support and services. Thus, **informed and specific targeting is necessary** for efficient and effective public programs.

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