

What Are the Differences Between Short-Term and Long-Term Welfare Users?

Background

The majority of women who receive Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) are short-term assistance users and leave AFDC within two years. Long-term users of public assistance, however, present a dilemma to both state and national policymakers in terms of cost and perceived "welfare dependency." The federal Family Support Act and its Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program now directs states to focus upon education, training, job search, and job development activities for potential long-term users of AFDC.

Using five years of Family Income Study data, we compared the characteristics of short-term and long-term users of AFDC in Washington State during the period of 1988-1992.

Family Income Study Findings

- There were *no* statistically significant differences between short-term and long-term users in many characteristics, such as age, race, education level, number of children, or growing up in a family that received welfare.
- There were statistically significant differences in:

	Short-Term	Long-Term
Work		
• Worked before first welfare use	77%	72%
• Recent work experience	47%	14%
• Hourly wages	\$5.33	\$4.66
Household Composition/Marriage Status		
• Two adults in household	49%	30%
• Currently married	38%	11%
• Never married	14%	33%
Location in State		
• Urban, Western Washington	43%	57%

(over)

Discussion

Short-term and long-term users of public assistance differed in three major areas: work experience, household composition/marriage status, and location in state.

Low education level is often viewed as characteristic of long-term assistance users. However, we found that both short and long-term users had the same average level of education (11 years), but that short-term users had more work experience and *more recent* work experience than long-term users.

Definitions

We defined *short-term users* as women living in households that received public assistance for less than 12 months continuously, and *long-term users* as women living in households that received public assistance continuously for more than 36 months. We defined *recent work experience* as more than 500 hours of paid employment in the past 12 months. *Hourly wages* were calculated by dividing total annual earnings by the number of hours worked.

For further information, contact Carol Webster or Greg Weeks at (360) 866-6000, extension 6380.

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