

The Misuse of Opinion Polls to Promote “Punishing” Work Requirements: Why Policy Details Matter

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Most conservatives believe the 1996 welfare reform, particularly the creation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant has been a success and is a model for reforming other safety net programs. Speaker Ryan has often pointed to TANF’s work requirements as the key to this putative “success”:

[The 1996 welfare reform law] is the crown jewel and the centerpiece of some of the most successful social policy legislation we’ve passed. It lowered child poverty rates, it moved people from welfare to work – because of these work requirements.²

The idea that TANF created a “work requirement” and “fixed” a welfare program is, by any objective analysis, wrong. While the law sent a symbolic message about the importance of work requirements and time limits, in practice, neither of these elements have been implemented in the way Congress intended. In fact, TANF is not “welfare reform” at all, but a flexible funding stream that has failed to provide an adequate safety net or an effective welfare-to-work program. In many states, it has become a slush fund used to supplant state spending and fill budget holes.

TANF’s work requirements are one of the most notable examples of misguided policymaking – they are unreasonable, dysfunctional, and are not about work. Their main function has been to impose barriers and cut caseloads through a process known as “bureaucratic disentanglement.” Even with sharply reduced caseloads, states have resorted to gimmicks to satisfy federal work rate targets that themselves are unreasonable. Such gimmickry does nothing to help the poor get connected to work opportunities. (For a detailed discussion of how these requirements have failed, see “TANF Work Requirements: An Epic Fail” in *TANF is Broken! It’s Time to Reform Welfare Reform.*³)

While work requirements can be a useful policy tool, they should be reasonable (for recipients), realistic (for states), and based on credible evidence (i.e., findings from a randomized control trial). As policymakers consider expanding work requirements, they should keep these factors in mind. This requires going beyond simplistic talking points to focus on policy details and a careful assessment of evidence pertaining to the implementation and impacts of past efforts. What is not helpful is citing public opinion polls that rely on overly generalized questions about work requirements to justify what are often unreasonable and potentially harmful policies affecting our nation’s most vulnerable citizens.

Public Opinion and Work Requirements – Generally

Conservatives often cite public opinion polls to suggest that their proposals to expand work requirements for welfare programs enjoy public support. For example, the “Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility” report released by Speaker Ryan as part of a series of reports under the rubric of *A Better Way* had the following statement:

According to a November 2015 poll, 89 percent of Americans agree that work-capable adults who receive welfare assistance from the government should be required to work or prepare for work in exchange for receiving benefits.⁴

Similarly, Robert Doar of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) recently stated:

“In a survey conducted in 2016, 87% of Americans, including 80% of poor Americans, agreed that poor people should be required to work or seek work in exchange for benefits.”⁵

Doar’s data come from AEI’s “2016 Poverty Survey,” which posed the question about work requirements in the following manner.

Some welfare programs have different requirements to qualify for benefits. Which one of the following do you think is generally the better approach?

Requiring poor people to seek work or participate in a training program, if they are physically able to do so, in return for benefits, OR	87%
Sending benefits to the poor without asking for any effort in return?	9%
Don’t know	3%

The way the question is worded, is it a surprise that 87 percent say they support work requirements?

The Foundation for Government Accountability (FGA) “found that 90 percent of all voters support requiring able-bodied adults to work, train, or volunteer at least part-time in order to receive welfare.”⁶ Tarren Bragdon, the president of the FGA, went on to claim:

“Voters are demanding that policymakers pursue welfare reforms that can move millions of able-bodied adults from welfare to work.”⁷

Many other conservatives make similar claims – often to support work requirements that are not reasonable or realistic. The most recent example of a proposal that fits this category is the House Agriculture Committee’s proposed work requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps).

The House Farm Bill’s “Punishing” Work Requirements⁸

The House Agriculture Committee’s farm bill (passed on April 18) would significantly expand the scope of work requirements for SNAP recipients, requiring able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 and 59 who don’t have children under 6 to work or participate in a work program for at least 20 hours per week in exchange for a benefit of about \$150 to \$185 a month. For those who are not employed, this equates to less than \$2 in benefits per hour of participation in a work-related activity. Failure to meet the bill’s work requirements would result in a one year loss of benefits for the first infraction and three years for a subsequent one.⁹ These requirements are considerably harsher than the current rules for able-bodied adults without dependents

(ABAWDs), where the hours of participation in a workfare or community service program can be based on the SNAP allotment divided by the minimum wage – resulting in a weekly requirement of about 6 hours.

Robert Rector of The Heritage Foundation is an ardent supporter of work requirements, but even he has expressed serious reservations about the House bill, particularly the unreasonableness of its hourly requirement:

It was easy defending the Maine program, because I could say it only asked for six hours of community service, but it has to be proportionate. The idea here is not to punish these people.¹⁰

He also raised concerns in terms of the duration of the sanction – an entire year for the first infraction and three years for subsequent ones:

That’s exactly what you don’t want to do. You want to have a work program where it’s very firm but it’s very forgiving: If you didn’t do what you were supposed to do last month, okay, we’re not going to give you the benefit, but if you want to do the right thing this month we’ll put you back on the rolls.¹¹

As a result, he predicts:

The severity of these penalties is unnecessary and counter-productive. The sanctions’ severity means that they are not likely to be enforced; bureaucracies will face incentives to find other legal ways to determine that recipients met work requirements regardless of whether they actually did.¹²

If a public opinion poll provided this background, many of those who support work requirements generally might have a different view about the House bill (and others like it).

The Importance of Policy Details

Like most Americans, I support work requirements, “*generally*”, but for most people, support might also depend on a host of factors. For some, it may be the reasonableness of the requirements in terms of the hours required and penalties for non-compliance. It may also depend on whether the work programs are designed to provide a “hand up,” not just to enforce a *quid pro quo*. Another factor might be the process for determining who is “able-bodied.” While Rector found the Maine program “defensible,” others have pointed to evidence that many people fell through the cracks, because they didn’t have health insurance and had difficulty verifying their medical conditions.¹³ For others, the cost of monitoring and creating work programs on an unprecedented scale may be a concern.

If advocates for work requirements want to use polling data to support their position, the honest approach would be to accurately describe the context and provisions of a specific proposal. If Robert Rector finds the central elements of the House Agriculture Committee’s work

requirements “indefensible,” “unnecessary,” and “counter-productive,” many other Americans are likely to find them objectionable as well.

In addition to the general public, one could also seek the opinions of those who would have to administer the new SNAP work requirements. The bill would pose significant administrative challenges to states, forcing them to create new bureaucracies to monitor millions of SNAP recipients to determine whether they are subject to the requirements and, if so, whether they satisfy them. Meanwhile, the bill’s funding levels would come nowhere near providing the amount that would be needed to implement work programs called for in the bill, particularly since states have not developed the infrastructure to mount large-scale work programs.¹⁴

In fact, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), a bipartisan, nonprofit membership organization representing state and local health and human services agencies, develops positions on bills “through a representative internal process that involves and relies on our state and local members.”¹⁵ In other words, it seems to rely on an informal poll of its members. The APHSA released a statement after a careful review of the bill’s specifics. While expressing general support for work programs, the APHSA raised multiple concerns regarding the administrative burden, the inadequacy of funding, the severity of the sanctions, and numerous other issues. As a result, it concluded:

...we cannot offer support at this time for a number of the provisions in the work solutions section of the bill as currently outlined.¹⁶

Policy details make a difference.

Conclusion

There is a big difference between finding out what the American public believes, in general, and writing effective legislation to put those ideals into effect. It is misleading and irresponsible to use opinion polls about work requirements generally to support specific proposals. Policy details matter. The goal of policy-makers should be to design work requirements that reasonable, realistic, and based on evidence, so that public support would be justified.

¹ The views in this document reflect my own as a citizen and do not reflect the views of any organization I am now or have ever been affiliated with. By way of background, I consider myself a conservative and have worked on welfare issues for the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the White House under both President Reagan and President George H.W. Bush.

² Cited in Rob Bluey, “Paul Ryan: HHS Welfare Work Waiver Will Undermine 1996 Reforms,” *The Daily Signal*, September 13, 2012, available at: <http://dailysignal.com/2012/09/13/paul-ryan-hhs-welfare-work-waiver-will-undermine-1996-reforms/>.

³ Peter Germanis, *TANF is Broken! It’s Time to Reform “Welfare Reform” (And Fix the Problems, Not Treat their Symptoms)*, July 25, 2015 draft, available at: <http://mlwiseman.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/TANF-is-Broken.072515.pdf>.

⁴ “Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility,” in *A Better Way: Our Vision for a Confident America*, June 7, 2016, available at: <http://abetterway.speaker.gov/assets/pdf/ABetterWay-Poverty-PolicyPaper.pdf>.

⁵ Robert Doar, “Employment Requirements in Benefit Programs Needed to Reduce Poverty,” Testimony before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, March 15, 2018, available at: https://edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/testimony_doar_3.15.18.pdf.

⁶ Whitney Munro, “New Poll Finds Voters Want Welfare Reform,” Foundation for Government Accountability, February 1, 2018, available at: <https://thefga.org/news/new-poll-finds-voters-want-welfare-reform/>.

⁷ *Ibid.* Bragdon’s claim is not credible. Millions of adults would move from welfare to work each year on their own regardless of whether work requirements are in place; there is no credible evidence to suggest that work requirements of the type being debated would cause millions more adults to move to work. The claims made by Bragdon and the FGA are based on data without a credible counterfactual – their statements on the subject are simplistic, misleading, and irresponsible.

⁸ For an excellent summary of the Farm Bill’s SNAP provisions, see: Ed Bolen, Lexin Cai, Stacy Dean, Brynne Keith-Jennings, Caitlin Nchako, Dorothy Rosenbaum, and Elizabeth Wolkomir, “House Agriculture Committee’s Farm Bill Would Increase Food Insecurity and Hardship,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 1, 2018, available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/house-agriculture-committees-farm-bill-would-increase-food-insecurity-and->

⁹ The adult could only regain eligibility by becoming employed for at least 20 hours per week or becoming exempt, e.g., for age or disability.

¹⁰ Robert VerBruggen, “Welfare Reform 2.0,” *The National Review*, April 26, 2018, available at: <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2018/05/14/republicans-welfare-reform-efforts-improve-food-stamps/>.

¹¹ Robert VerBruggen, “Welfare Reform 2.0,” *The National Review*, April 26, 2018, available at: <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2018/05/14/republicans-welfare-reform-efforts-improve-food-stamps/>.

¹² Robert Rector, Jamie Bryan Hall, and Mimi Teixeira, “Five Steps Congress Can Take to Encourage Work in the Food Stamps Program,” *The Heritage Foundation*, April 20, 2018, available at: https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/IB4840_1.pdf.

¹³ Patty Wight, “‘I felt like a caveman’: How work requirements for state benefits hurt one Maine man,” *Bangor Daily News*, June 3, 2017, available at: <http://bangordailynews.com/2017/06/03/politics/i-felt-like-a-caveman-how-work-requirements-for-state-benefits-hurt-one-maine-man/>.

¹⁴ The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) has a detailed and transparent estimate suggesting that to meet the bill’s mandate, about 3 million SNAP beneficiaries per month would have to be placed in a work slot. Using the average cost of establishing such programs from rigorous research studies of welfare-to-work programs, it estimates that the bill’s requirements would cost about \$15 billion per year, yet the bill provides for just \$1 billion, when fully phased it. See: Ed Bolen, Lexin Cai, Stacy Dean, Brynne Keith-Jennings, Caitlin Nchako, Dorothy Rosenbaum, and Elizabeth Wolkomir, “House Agriculture Committee’s Farm Bill Would Increase Food Insecurity and Hardship,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 1, 2018, available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/house-agriculture-committees-farm-bill-would-increase-food-insecurity-and->

¹⁵ American Public Human Services Association, “Preliminary Response of the American Public Human Services Association Response to the Sections in the Title IV Nutrition Portion of the Proposed House Farm Bill Reauthorization,” May 2, 2018, available at: <http://files.constantcontact.com/391325ca001/b80bf6ed-875e-4824-be8d-8298eeface15.pdf>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*