

# Work, Not Welfare

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**I**n August 1996, Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed a historic bill ending “welfare as we know it.” The 1996 welfare reform bill abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children—the federal guarantee of assistance to families with children who meet a statutory definition of need. It also required that the heads of most

families on welfare find work within two years or face the loss of benefits, and it limited all Americans to no more than five years’ worth of welfare in a lifetime.

“The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act,” as welfare reform was called, changed the social contract between the government and the poor, and it coincided with a longstanding desire of Americans to do something about the nation’s welfare system.

Public opinion has long favored work over welfare, and, in the abstract, Americans have long favored reforming welfare laws. A 1994 survey of welfare attitudes conducted by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University found that 56% of Americans thought the welfare system did more harm than good. In fact, nearly half of those surveyed (49%) said that what bothered them most about welfare was that it discouraged people from working, and fully 90% said that the principal goal of reform should be to get people off welfare rolls and into the workforce.

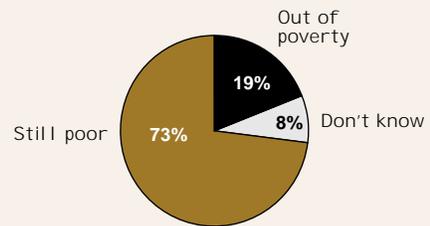
America. According to Gallup, welfare moved from near the bottom of the list of the most important issues for the government to address in 1993 to one of the top four issues in 1995 and 1996. And polls conducted in August 1996, shortly after Congress passed the reform, found strong support for the legislation.

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of those surveyed in an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, and more than four out of five (82%) surveyed by the *Los Angeles Times*, favored the welfare reform bill. When asked some five months later in a January 1997

Figure 1  
**Working Poor**

**Question:**

In general, do you think most people who have left the welfare rolls have gotten out of poverty, or do you think they are still poor, even if they have found jobs?



**Note:** Asked of those who knew of welfare reform.  
**Source:** Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.

“The fact that Americans support welfare reform even though they believe it leaves people in poverty seems largely rooted in the American work ethic.”

The 1994 survey also showed that, when it came to work, the public viewed poor Americans and those on welfare quite differently. Nearly half (49%) said that most poor people in the United States worked, while 44% said most did not. When asked about people on welfare, only one out of five (20%) said that most worked, and 75% said most did not.

The public debate about welfare reform heated up in 1994 with the election of a Republican Congress inspired by the Contract with

CBS News/*New York Times* poll, most Americans with an opinion about reform (60%) still supported the bill.

In January-February 2001, approximately five years after welfare reform was signed into law, and before the onset of the current recession, National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government asked the public to assess how the reform was working. The study was conducted among a nationally representative sample of 1,952 respondents

and included an oversample of 546 respondents with incomes less than 200% of the poverty threshold level. Respondents were placed into three discrete income categories (less than 100% of the poverty level, 100 to 200% of the poverty level, and 200% or more of the poverty level) based upon the number of adults and related children in their households and their household incomes. The poverty threshold level used was the 2000 US Census Bureau calculation, which was \$17,603 a year, on average, for a family of four.

The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School study revealed some interesting contradictions in Americans’ views on welfare reform and highlighted the overarching value placed on work in this society. It also found that the attitudes of poor and non-poor Americans were surprisingly similar regarding welfare and the new welfare law.

According to the survey, half the public knew there had been a major change in the law in the previous five years. Among those

who knew, support for the reform remained high, at roughly the level found in 1997. Three out of five (61%) who knew the law had changed said that the reform was working well, and less than one-quarter (23%) said it was not.

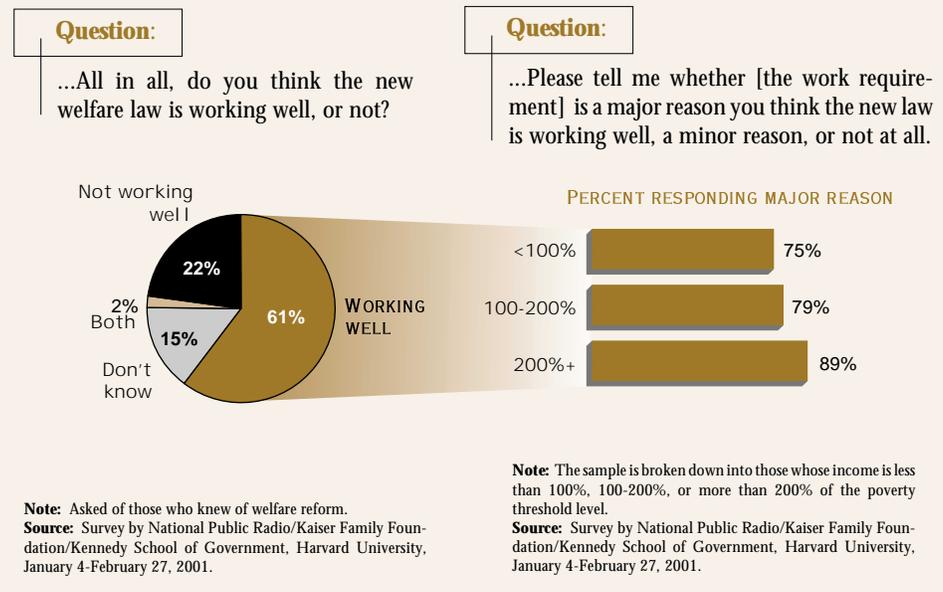
The view that the new law was working well was surprisingly consistent across demographic categories. Among respondents who knew of the reform, only self-described liberals and those earning less than \$20,000 a year had reservations about it.

Nonetheless, fully half of Americans who knew of the reform and were earning less than \$20,000 a year said the new law was working well (29% said it was not), as did 46% of liberals who knew of the reform (34% said it was not.) Moreover, nearly three out of five Americans then receiving welfare said they thought the law was working well.

However, at the same time that Americans supported the new law, they voiced serious doubt about its ability to help people move out of poverty. When asked whether the jobs available to most welfare recipients paid enough to support a family, only about one-quarter of all Americans (27%) said they did. In fact, nearly three-quarters of the public (73%) who knew of welfare reform said that most people who had left the welfare rolls were still poor, even if they had found jobs (see Figure 1). This finding held true across income categories and regardless of welfare status.

The fact that Americans support welfare reform even though they believe it leaves people in poverty seems largely rooted in the American work ethic. Nearly nine out of ten (87%) of those who said the

Figure 2  
**Shoulder to the Wheel**



reform was working well thought a major reason was the requirement that people go to work.

Nearly four out of five Americans below the poverty threshold (75%) and with incomes up to twice the threshold level (79%) supported this requirement, as did 89% of those earning twice the poverty threshold or more (see Figure 2). Support was also strong among those receiving welfare, especially among those formerly but no longer on welfare, and those who had never received benefits.

The public was, however, divided on the question of whether or not most welfare recipients shared mainstream views on the value of work. Forty-seven percent said most people receiving welfare really wanted to work, and 44% said they did not. These numbers had changed only slightly since 1994, when the Kaiser/Harvard study found 40% saying that most people receiving welfare wanted to work and 47% saying most did not. A large majority of Americans (78%) in 2001 believed there were

jobs available for welfare recipients who really wanted to work.

Respondents who were receiving welfare (53%) and those who had received welfare in the past but were not then on the rolls (53%) were more likely to say that most welfare recipients really wanted to work than were those who had never received welfare (44%). Democrats (55%) were more likely than Republicans (37%), and liberals (59%) were more likely than conservatives (40%), to say most welfare recipients wanted to work.

Fewer Americans (23%) who knew about the changes to the welfare law indicated they thought the reform was not working well. Among this group 64% (or 16% of those who knew of the reform overall) believed the new law was denying too many people the help they really needed.

Perhaps a more fundamental concern Americans expressed regarding welfare policy was a belief that the federal government's definition of poverty was too low. As

mentioned previously, the government says that a family of four with an income higher than \$17,603 is not poor. However, more than three out of five respondents (64%) said that a family of four with an income of \$20,000 was poor, and two out of five (42%) said a family of four earning \$25,000 was poor.

In addition, the public was almost evenly split on whether or not most people who get welfare assistance could get along without it if they tried. And

poverty level said that most people who received welfare could get along without it if they tried.

The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School survey was conducted when the US economy was strong and the nation's economic future looked bright. However, even at that time of economic upturn, 62% of the public said the number of Americans receiving public assistance had dropped significantly over the previous few years because changes in the

receive welfare and favored work over government assistance, but it also expressed overwhelming support for programs and policies that helped the poor and improved their chances of supporting their families by holding jobs.

The 1994 survey found strong support for government-sponsored job training for people on welfare (87%), and for government-sponsored child care for low-income mothers (85%). In fact, nearly two-thirds (63%) said the principal goal of reform should be to get people off welfare, but only if they could obtain decent jobs by being provided with training and education.

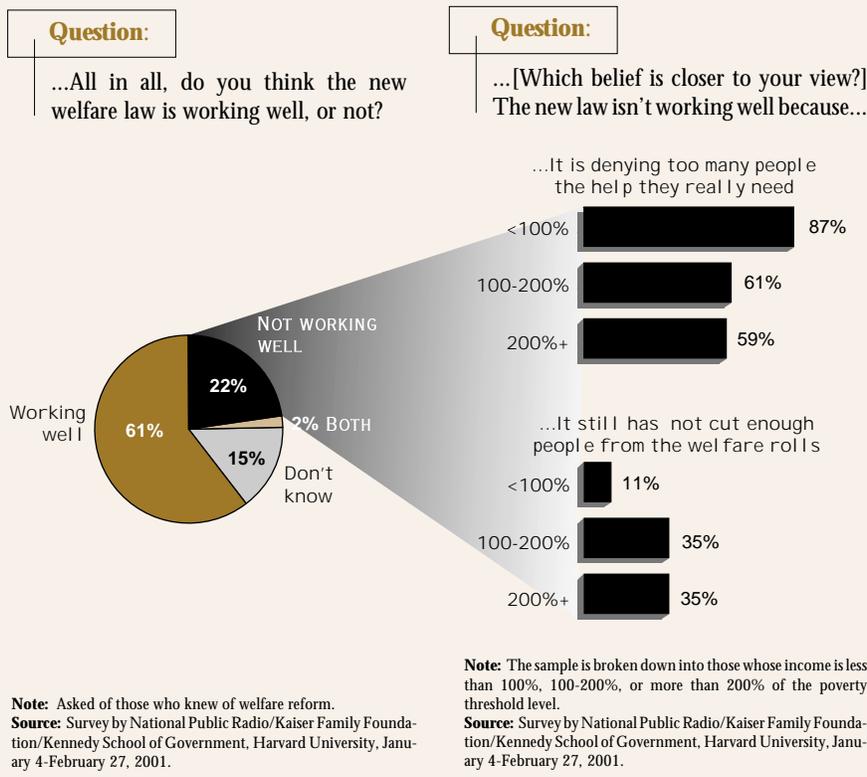
Similarly, the 2001 survey found broad support, across income categories and welfare status, for expanding job training programs (94%), increasing the minimum wage (85%), expanding subsidized daycare (85%), spending more on medical care for poor people (83%), and expanding public employment programs (82%).

In short, the strong American work ethic has led to substantial support for the new law even though most Americans believe it is not doing much to alleviate poverty overall. However, in their strong support for additional measures to improve people's ability to move out of poverty, respondents to both surveys also indicated that they did not want the poor to suffer.

It follows that as the country moves into recession, the public's support of such components of welfare as time limits and work requirements might decrease if Americans perceive increased suffering among the poor as a result of welfare reform.

Figure 3

### Giving Too Little, Not Cutting Enough



while respondents with incomes less than 100% of the poverty level (60%) were more likely than those with larger incomes to say most recipients really needed the help they got, still 49% of those earning 100 to 200% of the poverty threshold and 45% of those at 200% or more agreed. Forty-six percent of those with incomes twice the

law had forced more people to go to work. Less than one-quarter (23%) attributed the decline to the strong economy and the creation of lots of new jobs.

In both the 2001 survey and the 1994 Kaiser/Harvard study, the public supported limits on how long one could