

Q: What is the role of planning research in shaping public policy?

A: **Paul M. Ong** Professor

One unanticipated impact, admittedly a relatively minor one, of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 is a revitalization of the role of urban and regional planning in the area of social policy. The 1996 Act is the culmination of years of heated political debate over America's basic social policy. For decades, the prevailing approach had been providing income support for the "deserving poor," with Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) serving as the single largest public-assistance program and with female-headed households comprising an overwhelming majority of the caseload.

Conservative critics branded the program a failure by its creation of inter-generational welfare dependency. Moderates and some liberals faulted the program for failing to promote economic self-sufficiency. The election of William Jefferson Clinton to the presidency opened the way to a bi-partisan compromise in keeping with his campaign to end welfare "as we now know it." The 1996 Act killed welfare as an income-maintenance program, replacing it with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The "Temporary" in TANF refers to two features, a two-year limit to benefits to any one

welfare spell and a five-year lifetime limit on total benefits. The goal is to transition recipients to work. Many advocates have blasted the time limits as unrealistic and have argued that few will achieve the economic self-sufficiency espoused by the proponents of the legislation. These criticisms have merit but do not diminish the daunting challenges imposed by the Act.

Under the new policy, service providers must establish programs to help welfare recipients move off public assistance and into the labor market. This transition is no small problem. The adopted timetable requires states, which are responsible for administering the decentralized welfare system, to have half of their welfare caseload employed in 2002. According to this schedule, over three-quarters of a million welfare recipients would have to enter the US labor market between 1997 and 2002. To meet this deadline and to accommodate the initial two-year limit, administrators have abandoned reliance on voluntary participation of recipients in skill-building and educational programs that take years, and they have adopted mandatory enrollment in jobs-first programs designed to quickly place people into employment. Unfortunately, a majority of welfare recipients have very few skills, no more than a high school education, and little work experience. With these characteristics, the jobs within reach offer low wages and few benefits. These realities mean that the transition for many is from welfare poverty to working poverty. Nonetheless, the 1996 Act forces recipients to accept available employment as soon as possible. The alternative is to fall into even more abject poverty.

The shift to jobs-first opens the door to meaningful participation by urban and regional planners. When employment strategies centered on improving human-capital, planners offered little more than indirect support. Now, the situation is very different. The success of jobs-first hinges upon spatial access to employment opportunities, an issue very much within the planner's purview. The profession has struggled

with, and perhaps contributed to, an evolving regional structure that creates a spatial mismatch for those left behind in the inner city. Automobile-oriented development and suburbanization have created land-use patterns that have progressively increased the distance between home and work for everyone. Most of the population has the means (car ownership) to overcome this distance, but minorities and other disadvantaged populations often do not. These populations are concentrated in ghettos and barrios by housing discrimination, earn a limited income by which they can attain shelter, and face institutionalized practices that preclude subsidized housing in suburbs. With no access to an automobile or with access to only a marginally functioning vehicle, these residents find it difficult to traverse the regional terrain to access employment opportunities. Planners have long identified three strategies to overcome this geographic isolation: 1) moving jobs into the job-poor neighborhoods through community economic development; 2) relocating people to outlying areas with rapid job growth through fair-share and open housing programs; and 3) improving transportation access through better public transit and alternative systems that support reverse commuting. While not developed specifically for welfare recipients, these strategies are nonetheless highly relevant to implementing the 1996 Act. Each offers different potentials over disparate time frames. Community economic development and the relocation of people to outlying areas are likely to have only minor impacts for a relatively small number of recipients over the short run, while improving transportation access is likely to have the most immediate impact. Despite these differences, all three approaches must be pursued, for no single strategy is a panacea.

While planners can contribute to the implementation of welfare reform, that contribution will not come easily. The radical change in social policy generates a set of fundamentally disparate tasks and

responsibilities for a myriad of public, private, and social institutions. Planning is no exception. The profession's effectiveness in facilitating welfare-to-work depends on how well the profession redefines its practices and operations in ways that were unthinkable just a few years ago. Within a new paradigm, planning must clearly understand and utilize its unique strengths and at the same time acknowledge its serious limitations. Federal welfare-to-work programs and funding require collaboration and coordination with social and job service agencies, public housing agencies, and non-profit organizations. Joint efforts are materializing, but there is still a tendency for planning-related agencies to see the issues from their narrow agenda, whether it is housing, economic development, or transportation. What is still missing is an ethos that places the well-being of recipients first. Such a philosophy will develop, but it will require considerable intellectual debate and political struggle within the profession, and within the professional schools.

Even with the best possible efforts, the results of welfare reform will be mixed. It is naive to believe that most recipients will achieve economic self-sufficiency within the time limits of the 1996 Act. This nation would be fortunate if a majority of those leaving welfare can move into the ranks of the working poor. Even this modest objective depends on a robust economy, and this country has so far lived a charmed life by enjoying an exceptionally long economic expansion. The modest successes of ex-recipients employment will require of us to focus on public policies to assist the working poor. This means continuing the Earned Income Tax Credit for the working poor, establishing training programs to promote employment stability and mobility, and creating a safety net because of the paucity of employer-provided benefits such as health insurance. While these former recipients will not move into the middle-class, even with additional support for the working poor, their transition should be seen as progress, both for the individuals

and their families, and for society as a whole. Addressing the concerns of those entering employment, however, constitute only the filled portion of a half-full and half-empty glass.

The hundreds of thousands forced off public assistance but unable to find work will collectively constitute the failed half of welfare reform. As this becomes more apparent when more exceed the time limits, there will be increasing political pressure to revisit the current social policy. The change in the political winds, however, will not come just from those most passionate about the emerging crisis. Today's public policies inevitably come under scrutiny tomorrow with the cyclical swings in political ideology. Sometime in the future when conditions are right, welfare reform will once again be debated in earnest. It is likely that this nation will not return to a simple income transfer program without limits, despite the flaws in the current policy. Hopefully, there will be a serious search for a better approach, one that has at its core the well-being of people. For this to happen, planners and planning educators must position themselves to participate effectively in that future debate and to help formulate a new social policy when given the opportunity. The profession must start preparing today for tomorrow by pursuing active research and reflective practice. UCLA's planning program is very much at the center of these activities.

PAUL M. ONG is currently the Director of the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies and the acting director of the Institute for Industrial Relations at UCLA. His teaching and research focuses on urban labor markets, immigrants in the urban economy, and welfare reform.