

THE CENTER FOR



# *Rural Pennsylvania*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SINGLE PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD  
AND USE OF  
GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE:  
A NEEDS ASSESSMENT  
TO PLAN INTERVENTIONS  
THAT PRESERVE FAMILY FUNCTION AND  
LOWER THE RISK OF POVERTY

# **Single Parents' Attitudes Toward and Use of Government and Community Assistance: A Needs Assessment to Plan Interventions That Preserve Family Function and Lower the Risk of Poverty**

**Center for Rural Pennsylvania**

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The primary objective of this study, which was conducted in 1996-97 by J. Lynne Brown, Ph.D., R.D., at the Pennsylvania State University, was to assess the needs of divorced, single mothers, and to document their attitudes toward and use of a variety of public assistance and educational programs.

To understand the risks that divorced, single mothers may face because of reduced family income, the researchers conducted a needs assessment to document the participants' initial reactions about workfare, their use of educational programs, their opinions of certain assistance programs, their food procurement habits, and their opinions about their food security.

Researchers interviewed 107 divorced, single mothers from six Pennsylvania counties. The study found that many participants were not aware of the community programs available that may help them avoid public assistance; intense stigma often makes use of Welfare programs unpleasant for those in need; women using WIC experienced fewer stigmas because the program handled requirements and vouchers differently than Welfare; current users of Welfare and those with less education were uncertain of their abilities to support their families under workfare rules; divorce forced most of the women to use more economical shopping and food preparation methods, lowered their perceived food security, and changed their methods of stretching their food dollar; those with less confidence in their food security reported that the loss of an ex-spouse's income, erratic child support, and competing bills undermined their food security.

## ***Final Report Executive Summary***

### **Single Parents' Attitudes Toward and Use of Government and Community Assistance: A Needs Assessment to Plan Interventions That Preserve Family Function and Lower the Risk of Poverty**

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#### **Purpose**

Divorced, single mothers are at risk for needing public assistance due to reduced family income especially if they are less educated and unskilled, and may be adversely affected by Welfare reform. In an effort to understand their situation, the researchers conducted a needs assessment of divorced, single mothers which documents their attitudes toward and use of a variety of public assistance and educational programs. The researchers also assessed whether the participants felt at risk of needing these programs, their initial reactions to workfare, the educational programs of most use to them (and how and when these should be offered), their opinions of programs to require at life cycle events, their food procurement habits, and their opinions about their own food security.

#### **Procedures**

Volunteers who had legal custody of minor children were solicited by mail. Flyers were sent to all women who were awarded divorce decrees in 1995 and 1996 in six Pennsylvania counties (Bedford, Huntingdon, Centre, Columbia, Tioga, and Bradford) and who had similar economic and ethnic factors. Women returning business reply postcards were screened to check the age of their children and their marital status, and that any permanent separation prior to divorce had not exceeded five years. Interviews were conducted orally in each woman's home by trained interviewers, using a previously tested interview guide that included questions with a choice of fixed answers as well as open-ended questions that required verbal replies. The interviewer recorded the respondents' answers to fixed choice questions in the interview guide and tape recorded their verbal answers. Each interview took approximately 2 to 2.5 hours to complete, and those who completed the interview received a \$40 grocery store gift certificate.

The quantitative data from the fixed answer questions were checked to correct recording errors, coded, entered into data files, and analyzed using standard statistical procedures. The tape recorded data was transcribed into text documents, which were coded for themes using a computer software program and were summarized using text retrieved by key word searches.

#### **Results**

The 107 divorced, single women, who completed these interviews, were 99 percent white, with a mean age of 36. Only 37 percent had more than a high school education, but 80 percent held a full or part-time job, 52 percent of which were blue collar or service jobs. Nearly 60 percent had annual incomes of less than \$20,000. Over 90 percent of these women were permanently separated prior to divorce and had lived apart from their ex-spouse an average of three years. All had children and slightly over half had several children. Nearly 70 percent of these women were the only adult in their household; the rest lived with other adults, and over half of these were a significant other.

The community assistance programs currently most used by these women were domestic relations (66 percent), Welfare (34 percent), Food Stamps (22 percent), individual and family counseling (IFC) programs (18 percent), and SSI (11 percent). The most used programs in the past were Welfare, Food Stamps, WIC, and IFC. Three quarters or more had never used SSI, rent assistance, EFNEP, Head Start, emergency food and shelter programs, children and youth services, support groups, parenting education, money management, food education, and career development programs. An analysis of willingness to use familiar programs suggested that unfamiliarity was a reason some programs were not used.

The researchers examined the women's attitudes toward groups of programs: Welfare (general assistance, AFDC, SSI, Food Stamps, and Rent Assistance), child feeding programs (WIC, EFNEP, and Head Start), emergency programs (food banks, domestic violence shelters, and homeless shelters), and educational programs (parenting, divorce, money, and food education), using an attitude scale based on perceived access, need, stigma, and comfort in discussing use of these programs with others. These women had more positive attitudes about Welfare and child feeding programs than about emergency or educational programs. This was partially based on perceived need. Those with lower income (\$20,000 or less) needed Welfare programs more than those with higher income, and those with preschool children needed child feeding programs more than those with older children. Higher income women expressed more need for educational programs. Child feeding programs were viewed as more accessible than Welfare and emergency programs, but they were neutral about education programs.

Questions were asked regarding the stigma the women associated with using Welfare, child feeding programs, and emergency programs, but not educational programs. Higher income women associated the greatest stigma with Welfare programs, an intermediate level with emergency programs, and the lowest with child feeding programs. Lower income women associated the lowest stigma with child feeding programs, and similar, but lower, levels of stigma with Welfare and emergency programs, compared to higher income women. Use of a program lowered the perceived stigma associated with it. However, the stigma applied by relatives, Welfare staff, and the community made using Welfare more unpleasant, but did not deter all women in need from using it. In contrast, women's experiences with WIC were highly positive. Less stigma was associated with WIC because of eligibility rules, restrictions on voucher use, and young children being the target recipients. Reactions to workfare differed by the women's experience and education. Current users of Welfare and those with less education were less certain they could support their children under the new rules and felt that they were more likely to face competition for local jobs. The women felt that divorced mothers needed help improving their self-esteem as well as subsidized child care, transportation, job training, and money management and parenting skills to avoid using Welfare.

From a list of 17 educational topics, the women rated financial and conflict management, parent-child communication, emotional adjustment, and community resource location programs most useful now. The age of children in the household significantly affected some ratings; those with younger children felt parent-child communication, parenting skills, choosing good childcare, and food skill programs more important than those with teenagers. The most important characteristics of any educational program were arranging meeting times to fit the participant's schedule, providing practical skills for immediate use, locating the program within 10 miles of home, and the total time the program required. The most important advertising channels were the mail and sending a note home from school with their child. Women indicated that they might not attend programs because of time constraints, transportation problems, fees, location, and shame and embarrassment about seeking help.

When they were asked if any educational programs should be required in order to marry, divorce, or obtain legal custody of children, the majority of these women favored requiring educational programs (addressing communication, money management, understanding and making marriage work, and parenting skills and

issues) to obtain a marriage license. More of those living alone who were better educated and separated longer felt such programs should be required. The majority did not favor requiring educational programs at the other life cycle events.

These women were shopping less frequently per month and were less likely to raise a garden or serve game now than before their divorce. These families were eating an average of 20 evening meals prepared at home now, with their children eating an average of 7 meals a month with relatives. Over half were exchanging meals or receiving support from relatives to feed their families. They were using generic brands and specials most of the time, regardless of income; use of these now was significantly greater than before divorce. They were significantly less secure about feeding their children (based on four questions) now than before their divorce. Those living alone, with lower income and older children, scored lower on some of the food security questions than their counterparts. Those with less tangible support reported less money for food and feeling less confident about feeding their family. Less confident women indicated that the loss of the husband's income, unreliable child support, and competing bills contributed to their insecurity about feeding their family. More confident women reported that a steady job, control over financial decisions, and family support contributed to their food security.

### **Conclusions**

Many women were not aware of community programs that could help them avoid using public assistance programs. Intense stigma often makes use of Welfare programs unpleasant for those in need. The women using WIC experienced less stigma because this program handled requirements and vouchers differently than Welfare. Current users of Welfare and those with less education feel unsure they can support their families under workfare rules. The ages of the divorced mother's children, time constraints and needs, flexibility of meeting times, delivery methods, and location will all affect her use of educational programs. Money and conflict management, emotional adjustment, and communication skills programs were most useful to the study participants.

They felt that educational programs could be required to obtain a marriage license, but not to obtain a divorce or custody of children. Divorce forced most of these women to use more economical shopping and food preparation methods, lowered their perceived food security, and changed their use of methods of stretching their food dollar. Those with lower income, living alone, and with older children were particularly hard hit. Those with less confidence in their food security reported that loss of their ex-spouse's income, erratic child support, and competing bills undermined their food security.

### **Recommendations**

- Increase awareness of local and statewide human service referral numbers and programs.
- Consider providing some assistance (such as some combination of Food Stamps, medical benefits, or subsidized child care) to needy, single parent families for each of their children from birth to an appropriate age (perhaps 5-8 years). This would focus benefits on children's needs, reduce stigma about using programs, and ease single mothers' transition to work.
- Set eligibility rules for workfare so that single mothers can work, save some money, and own a car, and still be eligible to receive subsidized child care.
- Increase subsidized childcare benefits, and support training and licensing of qualified child care providers in rural areas.
- Implement a program, where needed, to change the attitudes of Welfare staff to be more positive toward clients, and increase staff persons' sensitivity to human suffering and individual needs.

- Focus job training for single parents on building self-esteem and skill assessment, followed by skill training. Use job training to increase their competitiveness for jobs and eliminate employer incentives to hire welfare recipients.
- Increase job opportunities for all those in rural areas, not just those on welfare.
- Form partnerships with local agencies to provide programs on money and conflict management, communication, divorce adjustment, and parenting, along with job training programs. Use peer educators to deliver these programs.
- Involve participants in determining locations, meeting times, childcare needs, delivery methods, and activities for these programs. Offer programs at multiple locations in a county.
- Consider introducing two levels of marriage license fees designed to encourage participation in marriage preparation classes prior to receiving a marriage license. A higher priced marriage license would not require any prenuptial education about marriage and family, while a couple could obtain a lower priced license by taking credits or hours of classes at a school, community college, or with a counselor.
- Encourage local food assistance programs to refer clients to local agencies that provide classes about purchasing food and cooking on a limited budget.

Based on the findings of this study of divorced, single women in six Pennsylvania counties, the researchers believe that implementing the above recommendations would enhance the success of welfare and reduce these women's need for Welfare overall, which could hopefully be the case throughout the state.