

# Policy Brief #2

## Safety and Self-Sufficiency: Welfare, Domestic Violence, and Child Support

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) introduced many changes into the welfare delivery system: employment mandates, time limits for receiving public assistance, paternity establishment, children's school attendance provisions, family cap provisions, and strict child support cooperation mandates. If welfare recipients do not comply with new laws and regulations, they can be sanctioned and the cash assistance benefits reduced.

Under PRWORA, welfare recipients are required to cooperate with the state child support program in establishing paternity and obtaining support for their children. There is additional pressure for custodial parents to reveal what they know about the identity of the non-custodial parent, providing name and other information required by states. The new law gives the states discretion to claim non-cooperation on the part of the custodial parent, which can result in the family being ineligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits.

Changes in TANF and the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) programs have made it more important than ever that domestic violence be examined carefully so that recipients can receive child support from absent parents, leave the welfare rolls and stay off of public assistance. Domestic violence is disproportionately more common among low-income populations<sup>1</sup>, therefore a large percent of women who receive TANF benefits are current or former victims of domestic violence. The Journal of the American Medical Association reports that, over their lifetimes as many as 65% of welfare recipients experience abuse.<sup>2</sup>

Comparable estimates for Indiana suggest that at least 55% of welfare recipients are or have been victims of domestic violence.<sup>3</sup> A 1996 study found that women are four times as likely to be violently attacked, usually by intimates, if they are living in households with an annual income of less than \$10,000.<sup>4</sup> Among women who were receiving welfare benefits, 55% report at least one incident of physical abuse in the past year<sup>5</sup> and 20% report being in an abusive relationship.<sup>6</sup>

The widespread incidence of violence among the TANF and CSE caseloads has two main implications for the operation of these programs. First, victims of domestic violence have increased difficulty in the transition from welfare to self-sufficiency. A Massachusetts study found that abused women have more symptoms of depression, lower self-esteem, and report a lower sense of mastery. Domestic violence victims are also more likely "to face opposition from a former or current boyfriend or husband to their participation in a work training program or in paid employment."<sup>7</sup>

Second, the aggressive pursuit of child support from potentially violent, non-custodial parents may jeopardize the safety of custodial mothers and their children. In such cases, an ethical dilemma arises: "Should the state attempt to collect child support, potentially risking the safety of women and children?" or "Should the state not pursue child support and thus, implicitly reward abusive behavior?" While some abused women object to the state's attempt to collect child support, most domestic violence victims see child support as an additional source of income that will lead to self-sufficiency and a stable future for their children.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, some state CSE programs are implementing changes to allow them to identify adult and child victims of battery and implement safeguards to protect them from additional violence. Moreover, there is a widespread belief in the CSE community that with proper training, assistance, and planning for caseworkers as well as welfare recipients, child support can be obtained while maintaining personal safety<sup>9</sup>. (See Washington state's Address Confidentiality Program [ACP], below.)

### *The Opportunity*

At the May 11th conference sponsored by the Institute for Family and Social Responsibility at Indiana University in conjunction with the Indiana Family Social Services Administration, the following two related questions will be addressed: 1. How does abuse affect the ability of low-income families to meet new welfare and child support program requirements and become self-sufficient? and 2. How can the state design a transitional assistance program that serves battered women and their children appropriately?

The conference will present a comprehensive overview of the following issues: the psychological and physical consequences of battering, sabotage dynamics, and workplace safety for staff and clients.

At the conference, the Family Violence Option (FVO) will be reviewed. The FVO, Section 402(a)(i) of TANF, TITLE I of PRWORA permits states to waive child support cooperation requirements for domestic violence victims. States are not penalized if they exceed the 20% cap on TANF hardship exemptions or fail to meet work requirements because of domestic

violence good cause waivers. The FVO gives states the option of certifying standards and procedures to ensure that the state will screen for domestic violence and provide referrals for counseling and supportive services. The conference program will highlight innovative state practices such as the Washington state Address Confidentiality Program (ACP), which establishes a comprehensive system of post office addresses for victims of domestic violence. This program helps domestic violence victims keep their location a secret by using a substitute mailing address, and has enabled women to establish paternity, collect child support payments, and remain safe from harm.

### *Notes*

1. Moore, A. (1997) "Intimate Violence: Does Socioeconomic Status Matter?" In A.P. Cardarelli (Ed.), *Violence Between Intimate Partners: Patterns, Causes, and Effects* (pp. 90-100). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
2. Bassuk, E.L.; Weinreb, L.F.; Buckner, J.C.; Browne, A.; Salomon, A. and Bassuk, S.S. (1996). "The Characteristics and Needs of Sheltered Homeless and Low-income Housed Mothers." *Journal of American Medical Association*, 276, 640-646.
3. Lloyd, S. (1997). *The Effects of Violence on Women's Employment*. Joint Center for Poverty Research, MacArthur Foundation. See: <http://www.spc.uchicago.edu/povertycenter/violence.html>
4. Craven, D. (1996). *Female Victims of Violent Crimes*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Indiana Coalition for Human Services (October, 1997).
5. Welfare Reform Updates. Presented at the Indiana Coalition for Human Services 1997 Legislative Forum, Indianapolis, IN.
6. Allard, M.A.; Albelda, R.; Colton, M.E.; Cosenza, C. (1997). *In Harm's Way? Domestic Violence, AFDC Receipt, and Welfare Reform in Massachusetts*. University of Massachusetts.
7. Ibid.
8. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (February, 1997). "Administration for Children and Families." *Cooperation/Good Cause Forum Report*. Office of Child Support Enforcement: Washington, D.C.
9. Ibid.