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California Community Topics, an occasional publication series of the California Communities Program (CCP), provides useful information to citizens and local leaders about important issues of community governance, leadership, and economic development. The CCP is a statewide unit of the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, with applied research and outreach responsibilities. It is housed by the Department of Human and Community Development, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, at UC Davis. David Campbell is director of the CCP. He may be reached at (530) 754-4328; FAX 752-5855; E-Mail dave.c.campbell@ucdavis.edu.

Welfare Reform In Rural California: Issues and Challenges

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California's rural and agricultural areas differ significantly from urban areas of the state generating a number of unique issues and concerns related to welfare reform. The examples below are illustrative of the questions of interest to county welfare directors and supervisors.

Seasonality and Mismatch

Rural and agricultural areas have a higher percentage of seasonal jobs than do urban areas, which means that (1) unemployment rates are higher in rural areas, and unemployment is a "normal" or usual event for many rural residents throughout the year; which means that (2) rural residents often derive income from several sources in the course of a year, as they move from job to job or between work, unemployment insurance, and welfare payments.

How does seasonality affect the ability of welfare recipients to find jobs that provide credible alternatives to welfare? For example, how much is and should be invested, both publicly and privately, to prepare workers for jobs that will exist for less than six months? What types of public supportive services should be provided to workers for such jobs? Should public funds be used to provide transportation and child care services that facilitate employment in the six-week raisin harvest that often involves long hours and six day weeks? Are public-private partnerships possible to (1) provide supportive services and/or (2) maintain health and other benefits between employers to make seasonal jobs more attractive to workers?

Most welfare recipients are women and children; many of the entry-level jobs in rural and agricultural areas have unusually high proportions of men, including farm work, construction, forestry, and fishing. As recipients are moved into work, there is a potential mismatch between recipient characteristics and the current characteristics of entry level jobs and workers. How can public and private efforts move women into nontraditional jobs? For example, what is the potential for labor aids to make farm work less strenuous, so that field conveyor belts in lettuce and melon harvests can permit women and older workers to be employed in what is otherwise a job mostly filled by young men?

Economics and Restructuring

The economies of rural and agricultural areas are different. A higher percentage of employers are small, which means that employees are less likely to receive fringe benefits, employers are less likely to offer child care facilities, cafeterias, and formal training to workers without experience, and employees are most likely to commute to work in private vehicles. The major industries in rural and agricultural areas (farming, forestry, fishing, construction, wood manufacturing, and food processing) have above average injury and fatality rates.

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Many rural and agricultural areas are undergoing economic restructuring, notably the decline of forestry and fisheries in the northern and mountain counties of the state. How should human services delivery and supportive services be integrated into the economic development plans that each of these counties is developing and revising? In rural and agricultural economies, the demise of a major industry or employer can lead to job losses for the workers directly involved as well as have negative multiplier consequences. For example, in many rural communities, housing prices are low and home ownership is high. If a major industry or employer shrinks, laid-off workers may face choices that include losses on homes they own if they move from the area, versus lower wages and fewer benefits if they remain in the local labor market.

How should human services be delivered in such rural and agricultural economies? Should supportive services include guarantees of trained workers for employers who move to the area, and guarantees of jobs for those who complete training? How effective are subsidies to recipients who move from the area to places where they are more likely to find jobs?

Administration/Implementation

The administration and implementation of CalWORKS is different in rural and agricultural counties for several reasons:

1. Smaller caseloads make it less likely that outside vendors will seek to provide welfare to work services, since they cannot achieve economies of scale. Thus, human services are more likely to be delivered by public agencies in rural and agricultural areas.
2. With human services delivered by the same agencies and often the same people before and after CalWORKS, there is a perception that rural and agricultural areas are less likely to experiment with “radical” new approaches to human service delivery.
3. In most rural and agricultural areas, there are few staff with the time or training to analyze data, compare approaches and outcomes in similar counties, and evaluate pilot programs.
4. Sanctions may operate differently: failure to meet work requirements can subject a family group or two-parents to loss of the adult portion of cash assistance, but not the children’s portion, and recipients in rural

and agricultural areas may be more willing to accept this sanction rather than change their behavior.

Research mapping the residences of recipients, the location of entry-level jobs, and the availability of public and other forms of transportation, makes clear that transit systems have to be redesigned to facilitate travel to work. This can happen by re-routing buses, adding feeder lines to existing bus routes, encouraging the provision of child care on site so that those accepting entry-level positions do not have to make multiple stops to drop off children en route to work, etc. These tasks tend to be more difficult or unfeasible in many rural areas. Transit systems aimed to help recipients get into stable jobs should be flexible, and anticipate “failure” in the sense that most of those who initially use transit to get to work are likely to switch to private cars as soon as possible.

Natural Disasters

Freezes and floods have greater economic impacts in rural and agricultural areas than in urban economies: they often strike when there are few alternative income-earning opportunities, so that direct and multiplier losses of jobs and incomes can be very high. How should public and private aid be provided and coordinated to help those in need while preserving ties to the labor market?

For example, the response to the 1990 freeze in the San Joaquin Valley was widely considered too slow and insufficient. The response to the 1998 freeze was much faster and more generous. A comparison of the two freezes- different damages, responses, welfare systems, and different conditions elsewhere in the state- might suggest lessons for how to administer human services programs in rural and agricultural counties for the natural disasters that are bound to occur.

Immigrants and Refugees

Rural and agricultural areas of California have a unique mix of immigrants. Foreign-born residents are grouped at the extremes of the education- and thus earnings- spectrum: a higher proportion of adult immigrants than US born adults have more than a college degree, and a higher proportion of immigrants have less than a high school diploma. In rural and agricultural areas, most of the foreign born are at the bottom of the education ladder, and the refugees among them often face special obstacles to self-sufficiency.

In 1997, over half of the Southeast Asians in the San Joaquin Valley received some form of welfare assistance, and it was widely acknowledged that many of those receiving assistance also grew strawberries and vegetables and did not report the income from their sale. How should refugees who are entitled to welfare benefits after their arrival in the US be moved into self sufficiency in rural and agricultural areas? Are there any lessons from the 1980s-1990s experiences with Southeast Asians in rural and agricultural areas that could lead to revised policies on earnings, MediCal eligibility, unreported underground economy activities, or subsidies for settlement and relocation?

California has two-thirds of the two-parent families receiving cash assistance nationally, and did not meet the requirements to get at least one parent into work in 1997 and 1998. Many of these two-parent families are southeast Asians in the San Joaquin Valley who arrived as refugees.

A related issue is how to provide services to “mixed families,” families with a variety of immigration statuses. Mexican-born farm workers have long been the mainstay of the seasonal farm work force in California. In 1987-88, the US legalized about one million Mexican-born men who did at least 90 days of farm work in 1985-86; their families were not legalized, in the hope that the now legal immigrant farm workers would keep families in rural Mexico and commute seasonally to farm jobs in California. Many of these SAW workers decided to unite their families in California in the 1990s, and one result is “mixed families;” the father may be a legal immigrant, the mother and older siblings unauthorized, and the youngest children may be US-born citizens.

How should welfare services be delivered to such mixed families, and what are the interactions between welfare, unemployment insurance, and work? For example, how often do rural employers paying low wages help their legal workers to get Food Stamps or other benefits, or let them work under one Social Security Number while the worker collects UI benefits under another? How often do unauthorized seasonal workers who cannot claim UI benefits when laid off instead collect welfare benefits for their US-citizen children, as has been alleged in strawberry growing regions of the state?

There are many other research issues in rural and agricultural areas that affect welfare to work transitions. In some cases, there are unique groups with particular problems, including American Indians who may have few employment opportunities in the area, but may be unwilling to move away from ancestral homes. In most rural and agricultural areas, scale and density affect everything from job search to general knowledge of an individual or family, so that those labeled as trouble makers, or from families with this label, may have more time being accepted by employers even with additional training. Finally, there may be a willingness to tolerate more individualism in rural and agricultural areas, so that recipients are less willing to accept the need for new skills or training to make them more attractive on the labor market.

There are also unique underground economy and lifestyle choices that may affect welfare to work transitions. It is often asserted that drug production is a leading cash crop in the northern coastal counties, so that persons with no apparent means of support may nonetheless remain in the area. If large numbers of well-educated people choose to remain in an area that has few jobs for them, and they receive welfare benefits, what role should social service agencies play in encouraging them to make realistic lifestyle and employment decisions?

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