



There's a simple explanation, some critics reply—the economy. Former welfare recipients naturally succeeded while it was improving. But while a strong economy undoubtedly helped, research shows that state welfare reform policies played a much larger role.

Indeed, a recent study by Rebecca Blank, a former member of the Council of Economic Advisers in the Clinton administration, shows a direct link between state welfare reform policies and rising incomes among poor families. Blank found that states with welfare reform programs that offered “strong work incentives” showed greater increases in the income of single parents with children than did states with weak work incentives.

Besides, similar economic expansions before 1996 did nothing to cut welfare rolls, and our current economic woes have slowed but not stopped the progress made by reform.

But that doesn't mean the current law is beyond improvement. Congress should strengthen federal work requirements; about half of the 2 million mothers who get a TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) check are idle despite being able-bodied. Lawmakers also can strengthen marriage among the poor, which a wealth of social science research proves is the best way to cut poverty among children and boost their well-being.

If lawmakers take this advice, expect to hear more hysterical predictions among the naysayers. And count on them being just as wrong.

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