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PROJECT MATCH

Persistent Nonworkers Among the Long-Term Unemployed

The Implications of 20 Years of Welfare-to-Work and Workforce Development Research

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There is a sound piece of advice commonly known as the First Law of Holes: If you find yourself in one, stop digging. The specific hole to which we are referring is the very deep one created by the decades-long search for just the right employment-focused policy or program that will turn a majority of welfare recipients and others among the long-term unemployed into steady workers.[1] The fields of welfare-to-work and workforce development have been digging in the same hole for more than 20 years despite accumulating evidence that only about 50% of people served by either mandatory or voluntary employment programs end up working year-round. Over the decades, there have been continual adaptations and refinements of program models, as well as occasional but momentous policy reforms, and though some of these have dramatically increased the number of long-term unemployed who enter the labor force, none of them has achieved similar gains in the number who work year-round. And there remains a sizable group of people in these programs who do not work at all.

While just getting the long-term unemployed into the labor force is an achievement, the continuing lack of improvement in steady-work rates is extremely disheartening. At the most basic level—the economic level—the move from part- to full-year work results in more earned income for families.[2] But steady work also has profound implications for the social stability of poor families and communities—an issue brought to prominence more than 20 years ago by the sociologist William Julius Wilson in his still-relevant book *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy:*

[1] With continuing high unemployment in the wake of the Great Recession, the term *long-term unemployed* is sometimes now used according to the precise U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics definition: that is, people not employed for 27 weeks or longer who continue to look for work (and therefore are still considered to be in the labor force according to federal definitions). In this paper, we use the term in the less specific way that has been common in the welfare and workforce fields for many years: that is, people who have never or rarely been employed in the mainstream labor market and are part of a disadvantaged population (e.g., living in a poor community, having limited education, receiving public benefits).

[2] Suzanne L. Wagner, Charles Chang, and Toby Herr, *Ten Years of Working, Two Variations on Advancement: Changes in Annual Earnings Among Project Match Participants* (Chicago: Project Match, 2006); Dan Bloom et al., *New Strategies to Promote Stable Employment and Career Progression: An Introduction to the Employment Retention and Advancement Project* (New York: MDRC, 2002).

> In neighborhoods in which nearly every family has at least one person who is steadily employed, the norms and behavior patterns that emanate from a life of regularized employment become part of the community gestalt. On the other hand, in neighborhoods in which most families do not have a steadily employed breadwinner, the norms and behavior patterns associated with steady work compete with those associated with casual or infrequent work.[3]

In communities of high unemployment—exactly the target of many welfare-to-work and workforce development programs—a vicious cycle takes hold that is hard for a mere employment intervention to break. As Wilson wrote, and as many policymakers have come to understand, it is the broader problem of these communities' social isolation that must be addressed for "norms and behavior patterns" to change. This understanding is currently leading to a range of ambitious policies and programs aimed at community revitalization in cities around the country, many of which include a focus on the role of public schools.

With this paper, we have two goals: (1) to reveal the extent to which work-focused programs and policies have had consistently small effects—or no effects—on increasing sustained employment among the most disadvantaged, and (2) to explain how the growing national focus on the revitalization of poor communities and improvement in their schools provides alternative avenues for engaging adults in these communities who still have no connection, or only a tenuous one, to the labor force.

This paper is not a call to abandon welfare-to-work and workforce development programs, as they have proved effective for many people. But we do think it is time to put down the shovel, climb out of the hole, and survey the landscape for alternatives for people who end up in the low/no-employment group after repeated participation in work-focused programs. The mass of evidence on (un)steady work has grown too big and convincing to think that any additional tweaking of the existing welfare and workforce systems will result in the magnitude of improvement desired. Instead, the field needs to find new paradigms for policy and program development for persistent nonworkers, and those paradigms are likely to emerge from the context of community-revitalization and school-reform efforts across the country.

Research Review: A 50% Story

Over the past two decades, one study after another has shown that most people in welfare-to-work and workforce development programs do not become steady workers, employed month in and month out, year after year. Instead, the majority fall into the categories of nonworker or intermittent worker. The statistics on sustained employment are amazingly consistent over the years—no matter the mix of program services, government mandates, income supports, or labor market conditions. Programs might have preemployment services only or both pre- and postemployment services; they might be "light touch" or "intensive"; they might include education and training. Programs might be voluntary or mandatory; there might be partial sanctions or full sanctions for noncompliance. Programs might provide earnings disregards or wage supplements for those who work; there might be other benefits like child care or health care as well. The labor market may even be good for low-skilled workers. But the picture never looks any different: Most participants in welfare-to-work and workforce development programs do not end up working steadily, even in programs that have high job-placement rates.

Welfare-to-Work Program Research. In Project Match's own employment program in Chicago, an analysis of data for participants who enrolled between 1985 and 1996—the first 11 years of program operation—showed that 50% became steady workers, with unlimited, individualized

[3] William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 60–61.

placement, retention, and re-placement assistance from case managers. For many, the process took longer than five years.[4] As we were disseminating these findings, rigorous experimental research on other programs around the country began to show that Project Match's experience was not anomalous.

In the mid-1990s, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded the Post-Employment Services Demonstration (PESD)—the first random assignment test of an intervention to promote sustained employment, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.[5] The four PESD sites were welfare agencies in Chicago, Illinois; Portland, Oregon; Riverside, California; and San Antonio, Texas. Central to the model was extended case management for welfare recipients who found employment; welfare recipients were identified soon after job start and assigned to either a program group, which received PESD services, or a control group, which received any normally available services. The evaluators found that PESD had almost no impact on sustained employment—that is, the program and control groups looked almost the same when it came to the amount of time spent working during the two-year follow-up period.[6] Only the Chicago site had a statistically significant impact on sustained employment, but as the evaluators themselves explained, the magnitude of the impact was small, just three percentage points. It is also notable that at all four sites, the employment rates for both the program and control groups in the final quarter of follow-up were lower than in the first quarter. In fact, at all but one site, the employment rates for the program and control groups had already dropped dramatically by the second quarter of follow-up, indicating that many of the welfare recipients who had just begun working when assigned to PESD were soon unemployed again.

Also during the 1990s, a large and diverse number of state and local welfare-to-work programs were evaluated by MDRC using random assignment research designs; these welfare-to-work programs did not incorporate postemployment services, but they did have a range of other features that might result in sustained employment, such as education or training prior to job search or financial incentives for workers. A paper by Charles Michalopoulos of MDRC summarized the effect of these different programs on sustained employment.[7] For many of the programs, there were statistically significant impacts on sustained employment—that is, more program group members than control group members worked steadily for 12 months or more during the follow-up period—but no program was able to achieve this outcome for the majority of participants.

In Michalopoulos's article, for three programs with financial work incentives, the ever-employed rates ranged from 42.5% to 50.5%, but the percentage of participants who stayed employed for a year or more during the follow-up period ranged from 20.9% to 34.2%.[8]

For six programs that encouraged adult basic education or vocational training prior to job search, the ever-employed rates were higher, ranging from 55.7% to 82.9%. However, the percentage of participants who stayed employed for a year or more was still low, ranging from 24% to 43.6%.

[4] Suzanne L. Wagner et al., *Five Years of Welfare: Too Long? Too Short? Lessons from Project Match's Longitudinal Tracking Data* (Chicago: Project Match, 1998).

[5] Project Match served as a consultant to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on development of the PESD request for proposals and also provided technical assistance to the department during the demonstration.

[6] Anu Rangarajan and Tim Novak, *The Struggle to Sustain Employment: The Effectiveness of the Postemployment Services Demonstration,* Final Report (Princeton: Mathematica Policy Research, 1999).

[7] Charles Michalopoulos, "Sustained Employment and Earnings Growth: New Experimental Evidence on Financial Work Incentives and Pre-Employment Services," in Richard Cazis and Marc S. Miller, eds., *Low-Wage Workers in the New Economy* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2001).

[8] One of the programs required ***full-time*** work to be eligible for the financial incentive, which set a higher bar for participant outcomes than in the other programs.

And for four "work first" programs focused on up-front job search, the story is similar: Ever-employed rates during the follow-up period ranged from 66.6% to 85.1%; the steady-employment rates ranged from 31.1% to 42.7%.

Again, many of these programs increased the number of steady workers relative to a control group, proving that for some welfare recipients they were effective. However, the most successful of these programs did not result in sustained employment for even half of participants.

Wanting to crack this hard nut, in 1999 the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services launched the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) project in partnership with MDRC. For this project, MDRC used a random assignment research design to test 16 different programs in 8 states, and one of the measures of success was four consecutive quarters of employment. In a recent report on the findings for 12 of the programs, only 3 were considered successful and the impacts on steady work were small.[9] For people served by these three programs—one in Texas, one in Illinois, and one in California, each with a different target group and services—the likelihood of working four consecutive quarters had increased by only 1.8 to 6.5 percentage points, depending on the program. These programs did have a higher percentage of people working at least four consecutive quarters than in earlier programs evaluated by MDRC, but the fact that the program and control groups look so similar indicates that the higher rate of steady work does not have anything to do with the intervention; it is more likely a reflection of the particular people who enrolled in each program or other factors. Also, MDRC reported the average length of the longest employment spell during the four-year follow-up period, as well as the average length of the longest ***un***employment spell, and the two types of spells are similar in length. For example, in the Texas program, the longest employment spell was 6.4 quarters, on average, and the longest unemployment spell was 6.1 quarters, on average. This pattern reveals that while a lot of participants worked at least a year straight at some point, they were unemployed for about as long at another point, which is why the average quarterly employment rate in the three programs was never much above 50%. In short, these programs did not end up with many non-workers in either the program or control group, but they did end up with a lot of intermittent workers in both groups who did not become permanent workers over the course of four years.

Most participants in welfare-to-work and workforce development programs do not end up working steadily, even in programs that have high job-placement rates.

Welfare Reform Research. The many "leaver" studies that were conducted in the years after the 1996 federal welfare reforms present evidence from a different angle about the elusiveness of steady work. It is now generally agreed by experts in the field that the very large caseload declines that actually began before 1996 were the result of three combined forces: the very strong economy in the 1990s; significant expansion of government policies to "make work pay," including increases in the earned income tax credit (EITC) and child care subsidies; and the entitlement-ending welfare reforms themselves, most prominently work requirements for people receiving cash grants, backed by sanctions and time limits. While this once-in-an-era concurrency of circumstances may have led to dramatic caseload declines, it did not lead to sustained employment for most of those who left the rolls. In the late 1990s, the percentage of welfare recipients who ever worked during the four

[9] Richard Hendra et al., *How Effective Are Different Approaches Aiming to Increase Employment Retention and Advancement? Final Impacts for Twelve Models* (New York: MDRC, 2010).

quarters after leaving the rolls ranged from 57% to 90%, depending on the state, but the percentage who worked all four quarters ranged from 25% to 47%.[10] This pattern of statistics is by now a familiar refrain for the reader of this paper.

Research on Other Disadvantaged Populations. All of the studies so far reviewed have focused primarily on current and former welfare recipients, but there is evidence that sustained employment is also not common in programs for other groups of the long-term unemployed, including public housing residents. The federal Jobs-Plus demonstration, launched in 1998 in six public housing developments around the country, was intended to increase employment, earnings, and quality of life at the sites.[11] Once again, the demonstration was carefully evaluated by MDRC using a random assignment research design.

Across the sites, residents represented a variety of racial/ethnic groups, among them African American, Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander. Also, only half of the households had any family member who had received cash welfare in the year before the demonstration. While sustained employment was not one of the evaluation measures for Jobs-Plus, quarterly employment rates were. For all the sites combined, during the six-year follow-up period, the quarterly employment rate vacillated somewhat over time, from 50.3% at the beginning, to a high of 57.3% in the middle, to a low of 48.2% at the end. The percentage employed each quarter does not necessarily represent the same individuals, but even if many of them were the same, at a maximum 48.2% could have been steady workers. It is also important to note that quarterly employment rates for control group members were not very different—that is, Jobs-Plus employment impacts were relatively small.

[10] Gregory Acs and Pamela Loprest, *Final Synthesis Report of Findings from ASPE "Leavers" Grants,* submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2001).

[11] Howard S. Bloom, James A. Riccio, and Nandita Verma, *Promoting Work in Public Housing: The Effectiveness of Jobs-Plus,* Final Report (New York: MDRC, 2005).

And here at Project Match, with funding from Jim and Kay Mabie, we recently analyzed data for three community-based employment programs in low-income Chicago neighborhoods.[12] These three programs differed somewhat in their service structures, but they were all similar in that they accepted anyone from the community who sought services (that is, they did not screen out anyone); they made an open-ended commitment to participants, allowing them to remain enrolled for as long as they requested services; and they updated each active participant's outcomes on a monthly basis. The participants in the three programs were virtually all African American and about half of them were men, and for the study we had up to six years of tracking data (depending on the site) that ended in December 2006.

In these voluntary community-based programs, 24% of enrollees ever worked steadily for at least 12 months during participation. For all three of these programs, however, the bigger issue was that about half of participants never worked at all while enrolled, and this was before the recent recession. Those who never worked did disengage from the program more quickly than those who worked, but the average length of participation for the never-worked group was still almost a year. (The ever-worked group stayed engaged, on average, twice as long.) Moreover, none of the demographic characteristics we analyzed pointed to a predictive difference between workers and nonworkers in the three programs, including gender or felony conviction.

Research on Transitional Jobs. Most recently, transitional jobs (TJs) have become the go-to intervention when coming up with strategies for people with little or no work history, in order to improve their employability and create a bridge to the regular labor market. Beyond providing a temporary subsidized job, most current TJ programs

[12] Suzanne L. Wagner and Charles Chang, "Outcomes in Three Multi-Year Employment Programs: Establishing Both Annual and Longitudinal Benchmarks for the Workforce Development Field" (Chicago: Project Match, forthcoming).

also include some supportive services, individual case management, and assistance to find unsubsidized employment. While many TJ programs are very successful in engaging their specific target group in subsidized work, the problem has been that the majority of participants do not ultimately move on to unsubsidized employment.

Two well-run TJ programs here in Chicago illustrate the problem. The final evaluation of Opportunity Chicago, which focused on public housing residents, found that 72% of TJ participants had little or no work history, so the project succeeded in reaching a hard-to-serve group. However, program administrators concluded that "more research is needed to understand the effectiveness of these programs for extremely disadvantaged individuals, as preliminary data show many are still unemployed after working in a TJ" [13] (actual figures were not available at the time this paper was published). And in another Chicago TJ initiative, operated by the Cara Program and known as Cleanslate, only about a third of participants go on to unsubsidized jobs (though those who do tend to have very good retention rates).[14]

Methodologically rigorous research by MDRC using program and control groups is revealing the same lack of transition to regular jobs in several large TJ programs around the country. Since TJs have become the strategy upon which the field is relying, these findings are hard to swallow: If TJs don't help the long-term unemployed move into the regular labor market, then what will? In a surprising conclusion—though one that Project Match wholeheartedly endorses—MDRC suggests that perhaps the field needs to begin considering other positive effects of subsidized work besides employment:

> It is important to acknowledge that transitional jobs and other subsidized employment models have multiple goals and can play an important role even if they do not necessarily lead to long-term improvements in participants' employment outcomes. Certain groups—including long-term welfare recipients, former prisoners, unemployed noncustodial parents, and disadvantaged youth—have a very difficult time getting and holding regular jobs. Employment rates for these groups are likely to be particularly low in the current economic environment, but these groups fare poorly even when the labor market is relatively strong. The evidence suggests that giving these groups opportunities to work for pay could produce spillover benefits by reducing crime, improving communities, connecting alienated young people to mainstream institutions and lifestyles, or helping to reduce the stigma of welfare receipt.[15]

Whether in regard to transitional jobs or any other work-focused model, it would of course be a huge shift for the field to begin to value and measure outcomes for adults other than employment, but it might be liberating, allowing policymakers and program developers to think about the various ways that people can contribute to family well-being and community stability even in the absence of regular work.

Motivated Nonworkers: Building on Community and Parent Roles

Among the many people who do not become steady, year-round workers, there is a considerable range, from those who are motivated to look for work to those who are not, from those with long unemployment spells between jobs to those with shorter spells, from those with at least some work in every year to those who never work. At Project Match, we are focused on a specific subset of this

[13] Opportunity Chicago, "Making the Workforce System Work for Public Housing Residents: How Lessons from Opportunity Chicago Can Inform Rethinking the Workforce Investment Act of 1998" (Chicago: Opportunity Chicago, 2010), p. 4.

[14] The Cara Program's performance update as of December 31, 2009 (available at www.thecaraprogram.org).

[15] Dan Bloom, *Transitional Jobs: Background, Program Models, and Evaluation Evidence* (New York: MDRC, 2010), p. 45.

diverse group that we call motivated nonworkers. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) definitions, people who are not working and have not looked for a job during the previous four weeks are classified as "not in" the labor force (and therefore not included in the government's official unemployment rate either). Those not in the labor force are further subdivided into groups of nonworkers. The marginally attached are those who have looked for work in the prior 12 months but not in the prior 4 weeks; this group includes discouraged workers, who have looked for work in the prior 12 months but have given up looking altogether. Everyone else not in the labor force is considered unattached and they are usually grouped according to BLS-designated reasons for not working or looking for work—for example, ill or disabled, retired, in school, or responsible for others at home.

Project Match's target group can be found scattered throughout this unattached population. They are varied in terms of most demographic characteristics—age, gender, health, education background, etc.—but they are all poor and have little or no experience in the mainstream labor market, despite usually having been through at least one employment program, often as a requirement for a public benefit. We consider them ***motivated*** nonworkers because they are interested in activities related to their children or community when opportunities arise, though they may not know how to create those opportunities themselves or make the most of them once involved.

That is where Project Match comes in. Many of these individuals have children or grandchildren who exhibit a range of problems, from delayed development to bad grades to disruptive behavior, but they do not know how to get them on track and may not even recognize the problem. And even when children are on track, parents or grandparents do not necessarily know how to build on children's successes and foster their talents, by getting them into a better school or a high-quality enrichment program. In most cities, for example, the application and enrollment process for high-performing schools often has so many steps that even more affluent and educated families have trouble negotiating it, and many poor families are not even aware of the educational alternatives for their children.

In regard to their community, many motivated nonworkers have long been involved as volunteers, but the activities are often ad hoc, unstructured, or passive, so that participation is uneven and there is not an opportunity to build new skills and capabilities or try new things. Think of annual community cleanup days, for example, or monthly community safety meetings between police and residents. It's not that there isn't value in participating in these activities; it's that the expectations are usually pretty low for participants compared to what they could be with more structure and supervision.

There are many important outcomes besides employment that we can help these individuals achieve by building on their roles as engaged parents and active community members.

At Project Match, we believe there are many important outcomes besides employment that we can help these individuals achieve by building on their roles as engaged parents and active community members: Even in the absence of work, there is much they can do to ensure their children's success in and out of school and the vitality and stability of the community in which they live.

Roles as a Community Member. At Project Match's West Haven site on Chicago's Near West Side, where a mixed-income development known as Westhaven Park is being built to replace the Chicago Housing Authority's Henry Horner Homes

as part of the city's Plan for Transformation, we are developing a range of highly structured community stipend positions for nonworkers in public housing families. Many public housing adults in Chicago continue to remain unemployed, despite job search and other assistance available to them and despite implementation of a CHA work requirement to maintain eligibility for a unit: According to CHA data, as of December 31, 2010, only 50.7% of households in family housing (as opposed to senior housing) reported employment. In the new mixed-income developments like Westhaven Park, this high level of unemployment exacerbates many of the socioeconomic tensions that have emerged among residents and threaten the success of these communities. The tensions are being carefully documented through an ongoing research project on the Plan for Transformation at the University of Chicago, and Westhaven Park is one of the primary study sites for the project.[16]

With local partners, including three elementary schools and the property management company for Westhaven Park, Project Match has created stipend positions in an afterschool safety patrol, a groundskeeping crew, and a community garden. The positions are intended to give participants a productive, defined role in the community and to provide a worklike but manageable routine. At Project Match, we have seen how this type of engagement can change not only how participants view themselves within the context of the community, but also how they are viewed by fellow residents, which can gradually shift the social dynamic in meaningful ways.

Westhaven Kids Watch, the afterschool safety patrol, has been operating the longest, since January 2010. There are nine Kids Watch positions available at any given time at the three participating elementary schools. Two of these schools are in session year-round, so the Watch continues even during the summer. All residents hired must go through a background check, as do regular volunteers in the public schools. Watchers are assigned to a specific school and are expected to be at their posts every school day just before children are dismissed; each shift takes about a half hour. Working in teams of two or three and wearing bright orange Kids Watch vests, participants are there to make sure children get home or to afterschool activities safely, without loitering. Each Kids Watcher is required to sign in and out, keep notes on the daily patrol, and attend "debriefing" sessions with Project Match staff where concerns are addressed and best practices identified. The Kids Watchers receive coaching on how to interact in a positive way with children during the patrol and also how to intervene effectively if there is a fight or other problem; during patrols, they are in contact with the regular security staff in the school and, in the event of a serious problem, can report it to someone in authority.

At the end of the spring 2011 school grading period, Project Match staff led a group meeting with the Watchers to get and give general feedback. Most of the participants refer to the Watch as their job and it is an important part of their day, and most are so committed that they earn the maximum monthly stipend for successfully completing their patrols on all school days during the month.

The three elementary schools also value Kids Watch. The principal of one of the schools wrote in an end-of-year letter:

> The patrollers... have been very instrumental in assisting the children from the school grounds in a timely manner [and] reducing the negative behavior that can sometimes transpire from school to home.... We have seen a huge decrease in acts of misconduct after school as a result of Kids Watchers.

All the different types of community stipend positions are like traditional transitional jobs in that they are highly structured and highly supervised. There is a set schedule for each participant, along with very specific responsibilities that must

[16] See, in particular, Robert J. Chaskin and Mark L. Joseph, "Building 'Community' in Mixed-Income Developments: Assumptions, Approaches, and Early Experiences," *Urban Affairs Review* (January 2010).

be met for each shift; expectations are very clear and there is daily feedback, as well as regular group meetings for discussion among peers, led by Project Match staff. But the positions are ***not*** like transitional jobs in that the time commitment is much lower (for example, the groundskeepers each have a one-hour shift, five days per week); the positions are all tied explicitly to improving the community where participants live; and there is not an expectation that the position should serve as a stepping-stone to a regular job, though through observation and month-to-month tracking Project Match staff are able to identify if a participant might try moving up to subsidized or unsubsidized employment. However, even those who stay in stipend positions are "nudged" to assume more responsibilities when ready—for example, taking on some supervisory tasks. Depending on the specific position, the monthly stipend can be as much as $100 or $120 if all scheduled shifts are successfully completed, and the stipends are given in the form of a gift card to Wal-Mart or Target. Though not large, the monthly stipend has proved meaningful to participants and promoted engagement.

The Great Recession just might finally force policymakers to consider new forms of the quid pro quo.

What these community positions are providing for most participants—besides the modest stipend—is a positive identity within the emerging mixed-income community, in relation to both their public housing and market-rate neighbors, and also an ongoing opportunity to be engaged in their neighborhood in a well-defined and productive role. Within the context of Chicago's Plan for Transformation, these types of outcomes have become increasingly important to all the stakeholders as they realize how very difficult it is to create stable mixed-income communities from scratch, particularly when a significant number of residents are unemployed and likely to remain so.

Roles as a Parent. In Altgeld Gardens, a Chicago Housing Authority development on the city's Far South Side that remains 100% public housing, we are implementing a new child/youth initiative based on the concept of "do for your kids"—that is, activities that parents can do with (or on behalf of) their children to ensure their positive development and their success in school and extracurricular activities. This initiative is being developed with the CHA and is part of the Urban Institute's national HOST demonstration, which is testing a range of two-generation programs in several public housing sites around the country. The target group for the Altgeld initiative is CHA families that are subject to the work requirement but not employed.

Project Match's concept of "do for your kids" is distinct from other common parent–child practices and programs. For example, "parent involvement" is a formal component of many early childhood programs and elementary schools (e.g., Head Start, James Comer schools). In these programs and schools, parents' participation is an explicit expectation and there are typically a variety of ways they can get involved. At Project Match, we think of this formalized parent involvement as a type of volunteering that does not necessarily bear directly on their own child's development; it is closer in spirit to the community stipend positions just discussed.

Another example of what "do for your kids" is ***not*** is parent education, in the form of parenting classes or workshops. While these educational activities can have positive developmental effects for children, we are more interested in helping parents learn how to bring "concerted cultivation" into the day-to-day life of the family—a concept that takes a little explaining.

In the mid-1960s, sociologists began to write about the difference in adult outcomes—such as education, income, and social well-being—between children raised in high socioeconomic families and those raised in low socioeconomic ones. Some 40 years later, there is general agreement

that for children good schools matter, participation in extracurricular activities matters, and parent engagement matters, but there has been little scientific inquiry into what happens in the day-to-day lives of more and less advantaged households that could also account for different outcomes.

In *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life,* Annette Lareau attempts to shed some light on this topic through ethnographic research.[17] She compares what she terms the "concerted cultivation" form of child rearing she observed in middle- and upper-class families to the "natural growth" approach in working-class and poor families. In the former, parents "scheduled their children for activities.... They made a deliberate and sustained effort to stimulate children's development and to cultivate their cognitive and social skills."[18] In the latter, parents "generally organized their children's lives so they spent time in and around home in informal play.... Adult-organized activities were uncommon."[19] Lareau found that working-class and poor children, when young, appeared more relaxed and vibrant than their more affluent peers, but when older, their middle- and upper-class counterparts had developed skills and behaviors that made them more successful in mainstream education, work, and social institutions.

Project Match uses Lareau's ideas to build a "do for your kids" menu around several areas of activity for parents: (1) supporting positive early childhood development; (2) supporting enrollment in preschool and regular attendance; (3) supporting children's regular attendance at elementary school and improvement in grades and conduct; (4) getting children of all ages into higher-performing or more appropriate schools (e.g., magnet, charter, special education, private); and (5) supporting children's enrollment and regular, ongoing participation in extracurricular and enrichment activities. Project Match has previously experimented with some of these "do for your kids" ideas on a small scale in both West Haven and Altgeld Gardens, but the HOST demonstration in Altgeld will be the largest and most formalized test of the approach, including an evaluation by the Urban Institute. For the demonstration, we are using our Pathways to Rewards system as the framework for setting quarterly goals, providing incentives for meeting individual goals, and publicly recognizing families for their achievements at quarterly gatherings.

From Project Match's perspective, "do for your kids" is actually a meaningful approach for all disadvantaged families, whether parents are workers or not: The long-term payoff for children may far exceed the payoff from parents' low-wage employment in terms of breaking the generational cycle of poverty, by helping off-track kids get on track and by getting on-track kids onto a fast track.

Conclusion: The Time Is Right

In the context of work requirements for public benefits, many commentators are currently questioning the meaningfulness of employment-focused policies at a time when unemployment is quite high and likely to remain so. As Gordon Berlin, the president of MDRC, has written, "We are entering an extended period in which there is not likely to be enough jobs to go around—suggesting that we need to rethink the nation's safety net built around work."[20] What goes unsaid by these commentators, though, is that even when jobs are plentiful, there is a substantial group for which these policies—and the programs they generate—do not result in the intended outcome: employment. For persistent nonworkers, a continued insistence on that single outcome seems counterproductive, likely to result in wasted resources and a growing sense of frustration and failure for all involved

[17] Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[18] Ibid., p. 238.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Gordon Berlin, "A Safety Net Built Around Work—When There Is No Work," *The Hill's Congress Blog,* August 22, 2011 (www.thehill.com/blogs).

in the effort: the unemployed individual, of course, but also the program staff who are expected to deliver employment outcomes, the program administrators who are accountable to funders, and up the chain of expectation.

Abandoning the expectation of employment for all is not the same as giving up on individuals or families. It is simply accepting what 20 years of welfare and workforce research has proved and, for those who do not benefit from work-focused programs, moving on to consider what other outcomes can be meaningful and productive, not only for individuals and families, but for society as a whole. Project Match has always believed that there should be a quid pro quo for recipients of public benefits, but that the social contract should be more broadly defined. The Great Recession just might finally force policymakers to consider new forms of the quid pro quo. There is an abundance of initiatives—such as Promise Neighborhoods at the U.S. Department of Education and Choice Neighborhoods at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development—that reflect national concerns for the vitality of communities, the efficacy of schools, and the well-being of children, and it seems the perfect time to integrate these concerns into a new social contract that acknowledges the many ways an individual can make a difference.

About Project Match

Founded in 1985, Project Match engages in program development and research in a range of fields related to low-income populations, including workforce development, family stability, community revitalization, and financial services. Project Match's employment model for community-based organizations and its case management system for government welfare agencies have both been replicated at sites around the country. The organization's research division studies not only Project Match's own initiatives in Chicago, but also other interventions in the United States aimed at improving the well-being of poor families and the vitality of the communities in which they live.

Over the years, Project Match has been recognized for its contributions to the field. Early in its history, in 1988, Project Match was an award winner in the Innovations in State and Local Government program of the Ford Foundation and Harvard University. More recently, in 2008, Project Match was one of eight nonprofit organizations internationally to receive the MacArthur Foundation's Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.