

**WELFARE CASELOAD TRENDS
IN WASHINGTON STATE, 1997-2000:**

*Analysis of Long-Term Welfare Use
and the Approaching Time Limits*

**Mason Burley
with
Stephen Lerch, Ph.D.
Jim Mayfield**

January 22, 2001



***Washington State
Institute for
Public Policy***

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Mason Burley

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Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee

Washington State Institute for Public Policy

110 East Fifth Avenue, Suite 214
Post Office Box 40999
Olympia, Washington 98504-0999
Telephone: (360) 586-2677
FAX: (360) 586-2793
URL: <http://www.wa.gov/wsipp>
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Passage of the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant in 1996 established new participation and work requirements for families receiving welfare benefits. The 1996 legislation also stipulates that states may not use federal funds to provide TANF benefits to eligible adults beyond five years.

The first welfare recipients in Washington State will reach the five-year limit in August 2002. This paper analyzes the following questions:

1. How has Washington's welfare caseload changed over time? Has the duration of time that clients' stay on welfare changed since 1997?

- ✓ Washington State's welfare caseload declined significantly (40 percent) between 1997 and 2000 but has leveled off since early 2000.
- ✓ A smaller percentage of recipients are remaining on welfare continuously. The average length of the current welfare stay is 18 months. Prior to 1997, clients stayed on the caseload for an average of 28 months at a time.
- ✓ The welfare caseload is now composed of more recipients who cycle on and off the caseload now than when WorkFirst began.

2. What are the factors associated with long-term stays on welfare?

- ✓ Previous welfare history, low education, and each additional child in the household **increase** the likelihood of remaining on welfare.
- ✓ Work experience, additional income sources (such as child support), and living with other adults **decrease** the likelihood of long-term welfare stays.

3. How many families may initially reach the five-year time limit?

- ✓ Approximately 7,600 adults are estimated to be at high risk of reaching the five-year TANF time limit between August 2002 and July 2003. The number of high-risk adults represents 13 percent of the *current* welfare caseload.

4. What are the characteristics and circumstances of clients at risk of reaching the time limit, and how do they differ from the general welfare population?

- ✓ Compared with the rest of the caseload, clients at risk of reaching the time limit have significantly higher rates of reported health problems. However, they do not report substantially more problems with literacy or learning difficulties, substance abuse, family violence, legal issues, child care, transportation, or housing.
- ✓ All WorkFirst clients, including those at high risk of reaching the time limit, have spent over half their time (60 percent) since starting WorkFirst in non work-related activities.

I. BACKGROUND

WorkFirst represents Washington State's implementation of welfare reform under the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. WorkFirst guidelines became effective in August 1997 and established new requirements for families receiving welfare in Washington. Under WorkFirst, clients must participate in activities directly related to finding and keeping a job.

The 1997 Washington State Legislature directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) and the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to collaborate on an evaluation of WorkFirst that assesses:

...the success of the program in assisting clients to become employed and to reduce their use of temporary assistance for needy families.¹

TANF regulations prevent states from using federal funds to provide welfare benefits to families beyond five years. Both federal and state law allow up to 20 percent of the TANF caseload to be exempted from time-limit provisions. Beginning August 2002, the first families in Washington will exhaust their five-year limit on welfare benefits.

This paper discusses changes in Washington's welfare population since the enactment of WorkFirst in 1997. After examining overall trends in the welfare caseload, we provide additional information regarding who may be affected by time limits on welfare in Washington State. Specifically, this analysis addresses the following questions:

- How has Washington's welfare caseload changed over time? Has the length of time clients stay on welfare changed since 1997?
- What are the factors associated with long-term stays on welfare?
- How many families may initially reach the five-year time limit?
- What are the characteristics and circumstances of clients at risk of reaching this time limit?

¹ RCW 44.28.155

II. HOW IS THE WELFARE CASELOAD CHANGING?

The legislation enacting WorkFirst directs responsible agencies to “implement strategies that will cause the number of [welfare] cases in the program to decrease by at least 15 percent during the 1997-99 biennium and by at least 5 percent in the subsequent biennium.”² As a result of changes in state welfare policy and a strong regional economy, Washington’s welfare caseload has fallen by almost twice the amount called for when the program began. This section looks at the changing nature of Washington’s welfare caseload before and after the passage of welfare reform.

Key Findings

An examination of trends in Washington’s welfare caseload during the past ten years shows:

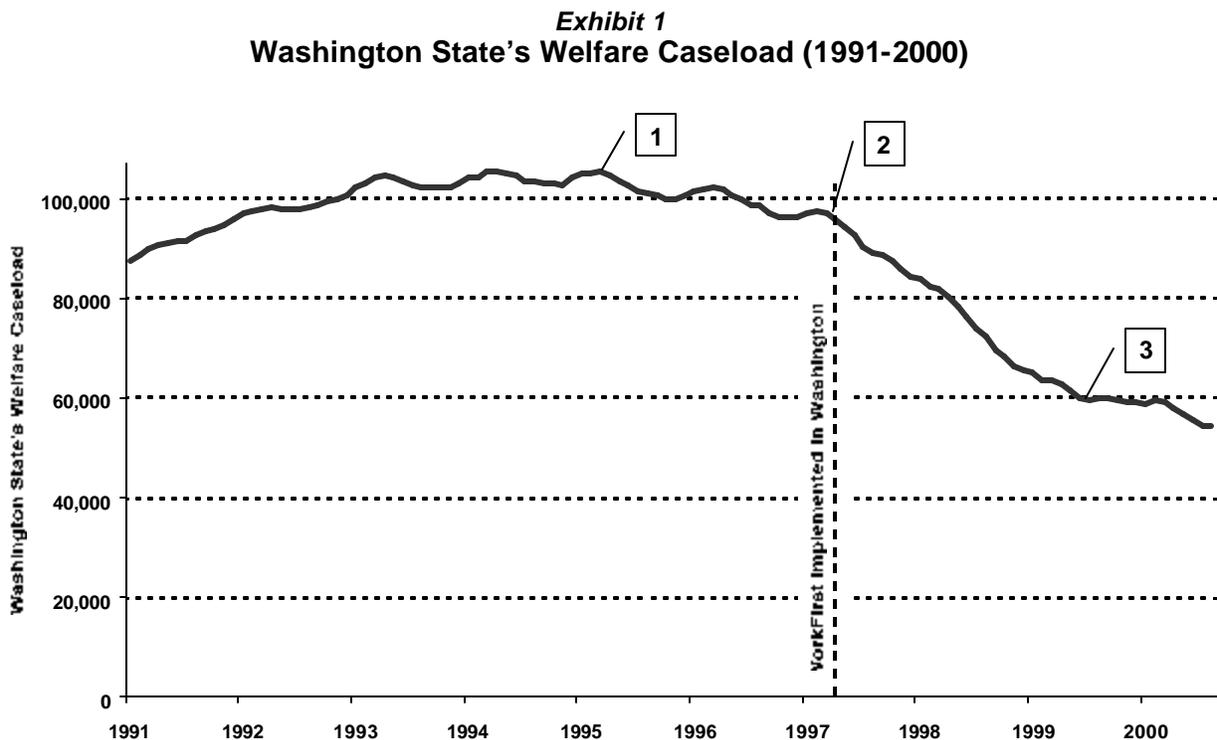
- Since 1997, Washington’s welfare caseload has fallen by almost 40 percent.
- This decline stems from both a drop in the number of families entering welfare and an increase in the number of families leaving assistance.
- Since 1997, more turnover, or cycling, of the caseload has occurred, with clients entering and exiting in greater proportions than in the years prior to TANF implementation.
- Fewer clients are staying on welfare continuously; the length of the average stay on welfare has declined by ten months— from 28 to 18 months—since WorkFirst began.

² RCW 74.08A.340(3)

The Decline of Washington's Welfare Caseload

Exhibit 1 shows the number of families on welfare in Washington State between 1991 and mid-2000. Three key points emerge:

- 1 The welfare caseload reached a high of **105,453** cases in March 1995 then started declining.
- 2 Around the time of WorkFirst implementation (April 1997), the caseload began to fall more rapidly.
- 3 Caseload decline slowed in mid-1999. At present, Washington's welfare caseload includes **54,238** families (August 2000).

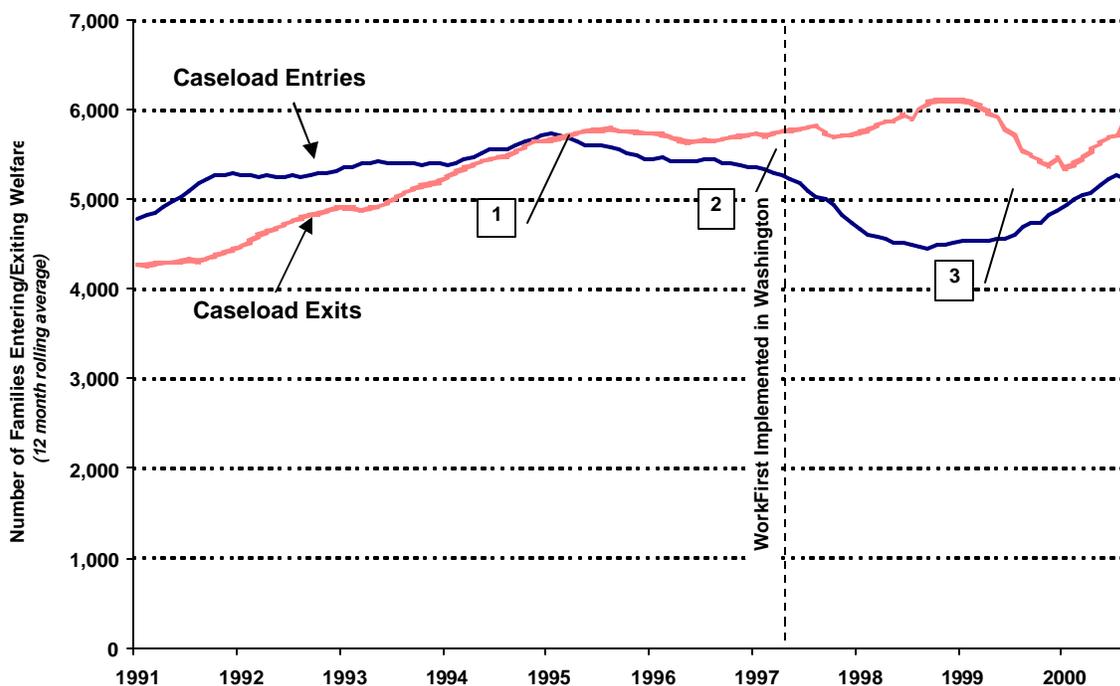


WSIPP 2000
Source: Office of Financial Management

More Entries and Exits Under WorkFirst

Decreasing welfare caseloads are often interpreted to mean that more recipients are *exiting* public assistance. Similarly, caseload *increases* are usually seen as more individuals *entering* the welfare system. Both *entries* and *exits*, however, determine the net change in welfare caseloads. Exhibit 2 displays the number of families entering and exiting welfare between 1991 and 2000.

Exhibit 2
Washington State's Welfare Entries and Exits (1991-2000)



WSIPP 2000
Source: Office of Financial Management

The three periods of caseload change highlighted in Exhibit 1 are also shown on Exhibit 2:

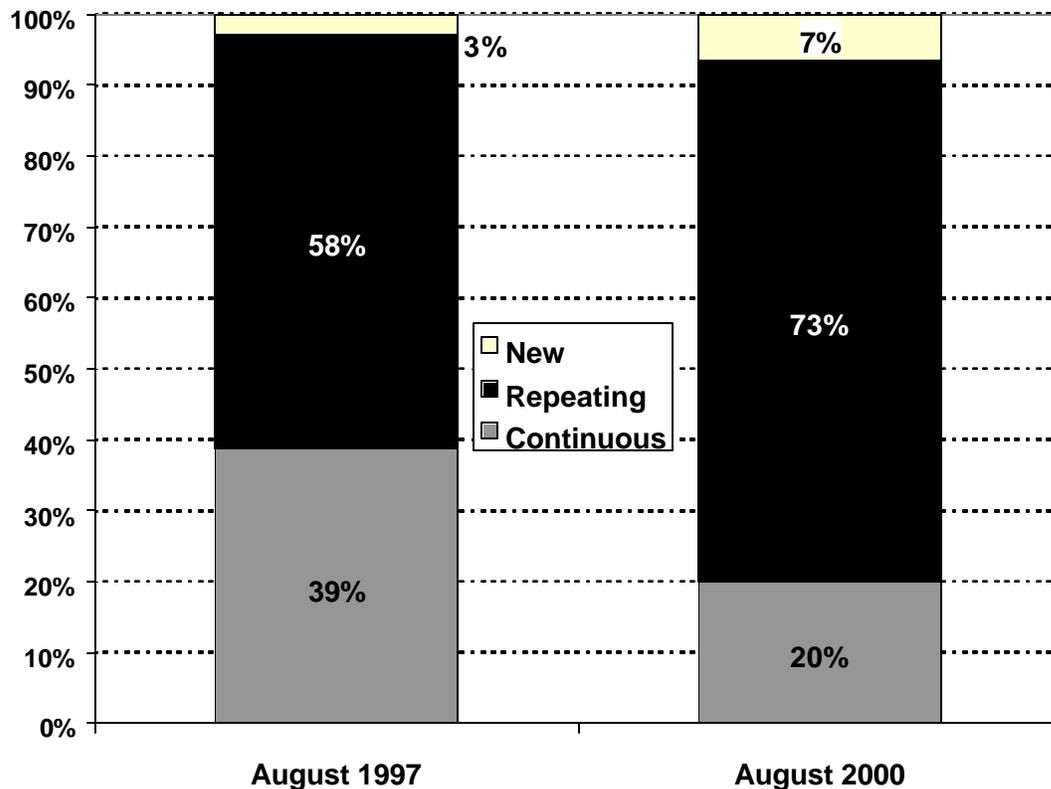
- 1 The caseload began to decline in 1995 as total welfare exits surpassed the number of welfare entries.
- 2 The decline in the welfare caseload accelerated in early 1997 when exits increased and entries continued to decrease.
- 3 By mid-1999, the gap between entries and exits narrowed, with the overall rate of caseload reduction declining.

Time on Washington's Welfare Caseload: Two Snapshots in Time

A significant shift in the composition of Washington's welfare caseload has occurred since 1997 with fewer recipients having long stays on welfare. When WorkFirst started in August 1997, roughly 39 percent of clients on that month's caseload had been continuous recipients for the previous two years or more. Three years later, only 20 percent of the August 2000 welfare caseload had a continuous, uninterrupted stay on welfare of two years or more (see Exhibit 3).

Among the remaining cases on welfare, a growing percentage can be classified as repeating welfare recipients. Repeating clients have left the caseload for some period of time during the past two years. The percentage of welfare clients with repeat stays increased from 58 percent of the total caseload in August 1997 to 73 percent of the caseload in August 2000.

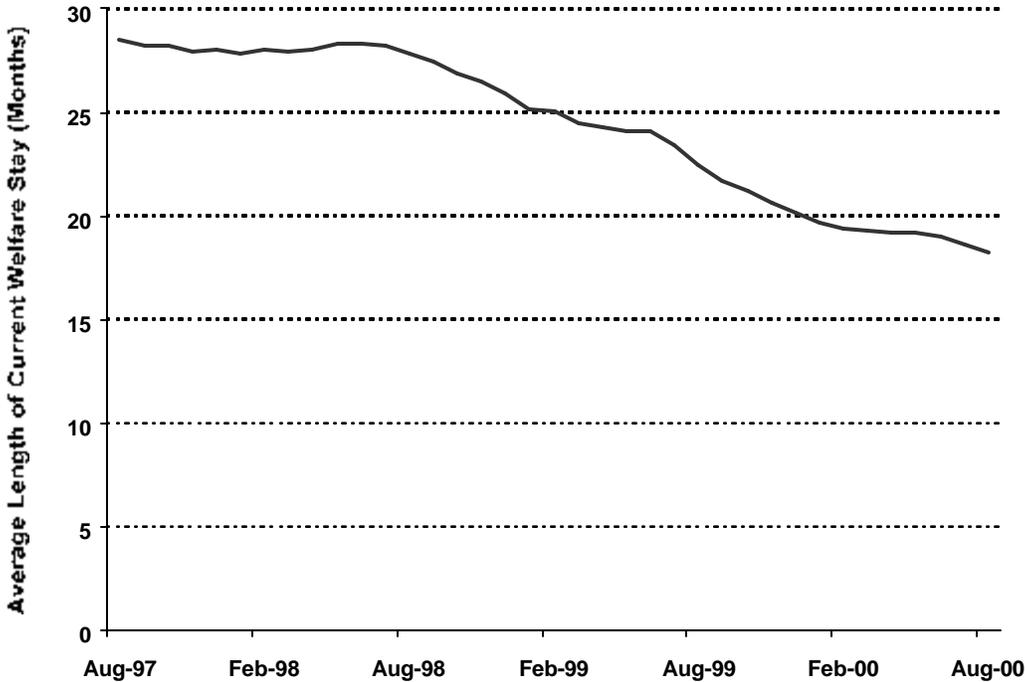
Exhibit 3
New, Repeating, and Continuous Welfare Recipients (1997-2000)



New welfare recipients (shown in Exhibit 3) include individuals who recently entered welfare and have not been on the caseload in the past two years. Although new recipients increased between 1997 and 2000, these individuals currently make up only 7 percent of the entire caseload.

The smaller percentage of continuing clients on the welfare caseload has resulted in a decrease in the average amount of time spent on welfare. The average length of the most recent uninterrupted welfare stay for the caseload declined by 10 months, from 28 months in 1997 to 18 months in 2000 (see Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4
Average Length of Current Welfare Stay (1997-2000)



These trends illustrate that more individuals are leaving welfare and are staying on welfare for shorter periods of time. In addition, when recipients leave the caseload, most (65 percent) stay off the caseload for at least 12 months, with the remainder (35 percent) returning within 12 months. For those who do return, their length of stay once they return (about 10 months) has changed very little since 1997.

In addition to the increased percentage of returning clients and a lower average length of stay, a greater percentage of recipients are cycling on and off the caseload. When WorkFirst began, about 10 percent of the caseload entered or exited in a month. During 2000, that rate increased to 20 percent of the welfare caseload.

III. WHAT FACTORS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH LONG-TERM STAYS ON WELFARE?

In Washington State, the five-year time clock on federal TANF benefits started in August 1997 with the implementation of WorkFirst. The first families will exceed the time limit in August 2002. This section examines the characteristics and circumstances of adults who may initially reach the five-year time limit.

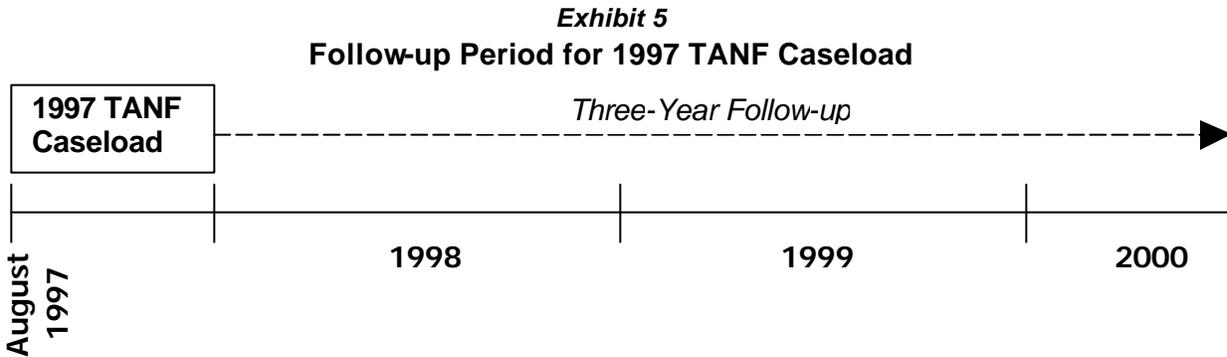
This analysis provides an indication of how time limits will affect Washington's welfare caseload in the first year they take effect. The findings highlight the following factors that either increase or decrease a recipient's total time on TANF:

- Recipients with a lengthy previous welfare history, low education, and young children are at the *highest risk* of extended stays on welfare.
- Current work activity, up-to-date child support payments, and the presence of other adults in the household *decrease* the likelihood that recipients will stay on welfare long term.

Under federal guidelines, a state may grant extensions for up to 20 percent of its total TANF caseload from the time limit. Estimating the number and types of families that may reach the five-year limit can help inform future decisions regarding extensions. Identifying factors that decrease time on welfare may help policymakers develop cost-effective strategies for helping WorkFirst clients remain off welfare and avoid reaching the five-year time clock.

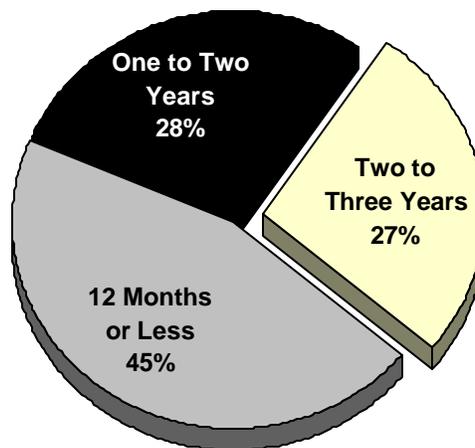
Identifying Long-Term Welfare Recipients

The first families to reach the time limit in Washington State will include individuals who started receiving welfare in late 1997 and have remained on the caseload with continuous or nearly continuous patterns of welfare receipt. To determine the characteristics and circumstances of these long-term clients, we examined individuals on Washington's welfare caseload between August and December 1997 who stayed on welfare most of the next three years (see Exhibit 5).



Approximately 99,000 individuals received welfare in Washington State between August 1997 and December 1997. Exhibit 6 displays how long these recipients remained on welfare between 1997 and September 2000.

Exhibit 6
Time on Welfare for Early TANF Recipients: 1997-2000



Almost half (45 percent) of early TANF recipients remained on the caseload for 12 months or less. Twenty-seven percent remained on the caseload for two years or longer. For the purpose of this analysis, clients on welfare for more than two years are considered long-term recipients. The following section describes the factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of becoming a long-term welfare recipient.

Factors That Affect Total Time on Welfare

To identify factors associated with long-term stays on welfare, we examined the entire 1997 TANF caseload to see which characteristics affected the length of stay on welfare. This analysis accounts for differences in client characteristics (such as age, years of education, previous work experience, and family structure) and local economic conditions and allows us to rank client characteristics associated with long-term stays on welfare. Exhibit 7 summarizes the factors that influence total time on welfare.

Exhibit 7
Top Five Factors That Influence Time on Welfare

Top Five Factors That <i>Increase</i> Time on Welfare	Top Five Factors That <i>Decrease</i> Time on Welfare
1. Longer recent stays on welfare	1. Currently working (20 hours a week or more)
2. More children in household	2. Up-to-date child support payments
3. Presence of young children	3. Additional adults in household
4. Low education (less than 12 th grade and no GED)	4. Currently married
5. Started welfare before age 22	5. Other non-wage income ³

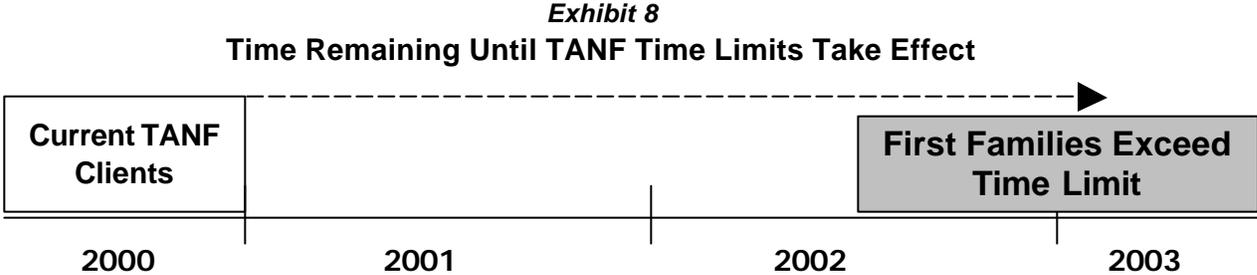
The factors reported here are based on available information collected on all welfare recipients at the time the TANF time clock started in late 1997. The final section of this report presents a descriptive profile (based on the most recent data available) of clients currently at high risk of reaching the five-year time limit.

³ Non-wage income may include financial gifts or other transfer payments (e.g., Social Security, educational assistance, and Labor & Industries benefits).

IV. HOW MANY CLIENTS MAY INITIALLY REACH THE FIVE-YEAR TIME LIMIT?

Among clients currently on Washington’s welfare caseload, we estimate that approximately **7,600 adults** are at risk of reaching the five-year time limit on benefits between August 2002 and July 2003. These cases represent approximately 13 percent of the average monthly caseload from November 1999 through September 2000.

Based on the known factors that influence length of time on welfare, we estimate the number of current recipients likely to remain on the caseload for the next two years (see Exhibit 8). By adding actual previous months of welfare receipt to predicted future time on welfare, we can calculate the number of families likely to be the first to reach the five-year time limit.



During the first 12 months after time limits take effect in Washington, we estimate:

2,364	adults are likely to exceed the time limit by August 2002
+ 5,273	adults are likely to exceed the time limit between September 2002 and July 2003
= 7,637 adults are at high risk of reaching the time limit on TANF benefits in Washington State between August 2002 and July 2003	

This estimate only accounts for adults who may *initially* reach the five-year time limit. During the first year that time limits take effect, long-term, continuous welfare recipients will be affected first. Over time, more recipients with a history of cycling on and off the caseload will arrive at the five-year limit. Future research will examine the experiences of welfare recipients who cycle on and off the caseload and attempt to determine which WorkFirst services, if any, contribute to more steady employment.

The next section discusses the characteristics and previous WorkFirst participation of clients who may initially reach the time limit. These recipients are referred to as “high-risk” clients in the following section.

V. What Are the Characteristics and Circumstances of Clients at High Risk of Reaching the Time Limit?

Compared with the current welfare caseload, WorkFirst clients at high risk of reaching the time limit are characterized by a longer previous welfare history, more children, and lower levels of education and work experience. Based on an analysis of assessments conducted by WorkFirst caseworkers, we find that these high-risk clients have a higher rate of health problems than the general caseload. We do not find greater levels of reported family violence, child care difficulties, or transportation problems for high-risk clients in contrast to the overall welfare caseload.

After starting WorkFirst, recipients are required engage in Job Search or work-related activities (unless deferred). Job Search includes a one-week workshop with assistance in resume preparation, job-hunting resources, and interview skills followed by mandatory employer contacts. An examination of WorkFirst activity indicates that high-risk clients have repeat occurrences of Job Search but spend the majority of their time in non work-related activities.

Demographic Characteristics

Exhibit 9 presents a descriptive profile of the 7,637 adults on welfare in September 2000 at high risk of reaching the time limit. Compared with other clients currently on the caseload, these high-risk recipients are more likely to have less education and work experience, more children, and a longer previous record of welfare receipt.

Clients at high risk of reaching the time limit also have fewer financial resources than other recipients. Five percent of these high-risk clients are currently working 20 hours or more per week compared with 10 percent of all other recipients. In addition, high-risk clients have lower rates of child support collections and non-wage income.

Exhibit 9
At-Risk and Other Adults on the Caseload in 2000

Characteristic	Adults at High Risk of Reaching Time Limit (N=7,637)	Other Adults on the Welfare Caseload (N=87,806)
Welfare History		
Average length of current welfare stay (months)	69	10
Percent who started welfare before age 22	44%	36%
Children		
Average number of children	3.1	1.9
Youngest child under 2 years of age	28%	34%
Education		
Less than 12 th grade education and no GED	57%	35%
Average grade level	10.3	11.3
Employment		
No recent work history (past two years)	45%	24%
Currently working (20 hours or more a week)	5%	10%
Family Composition		
Married	24%	30%
Never married	47%	41%
Other (divorced/separated)	29%	29%
Additional Income		
Child support payments current	2%	5%
Clients with non-wage income	4%	6%
Average monthly non-wage income	\$302	\$498

In April 2000, WorkFirst agencies initiated a screening and assessment program called VIEW (Virtual Integrated Employability Worksheet). According to WorkFirst policy, “a primary purpose of VIEW is to screen and evaluate participants for referral to (not deferral from) job search.”⁴

VIEW includes required screening for characteristics that may affect a participant’s readiness for Job Search. These issues include family violence, learning difficulties, substance abuse, and other health issues.⁵ The presence or absence of any factors assessed in VIEW does not necessarily affect the ability of a WorkFirst participant to become employed and leave welfare. Monitoring the prevalence of these issues, however, provides an indication of the issues facing individuals at risk of reaching the TANF time limit.

According to WorkFirst policy, caseworkers use VIEW to evaluate participants for employment readiness at the following times:

- Application or reapplication;
- After four weeks of Job Search;
- After Job Search or any other work activity ends;
- Before temporarily deferring from Job Search;
- When sanctioning; and
- Whenever the participant is not progressing.

Approximately 40,000 screenings and evaluations were completed between April 2000 and October 2000. Of the 7,637 high-risk recipients, 53 percent (4,010) received an evaluation for employment readiness. Among the remaining caseload, 42 percent had an evaluation completed in VIEW. Exhibit 10 presents the level of employment-related issues for clients at high risk of reaching the TANF time limit compared with those at low risk.

⁴ Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, *WorkFirst Implementation Handbook* (October 2000), Chapter 3.

⁵ Clients with literacy/learning difficulties answered “yes” to one of the following questions: “Do you have problems reading or writing?” “Have you ever been evaluated for, or diagnosed as having, a learning disability?”

Exhibit 10 examines employability issues for clients that have been assessed in VIEW.⁶ These figures represent a preliminary description of potential employment issues faced by WorkFirst clients. In most cases, high-risk clients do not experience these issues at a higher rate than the rest of the WorkFirst caseload.

Exhibit 10
WorkFirst Assessment Results (VIEW) for 2000 Welfare Caseload

	Adults at High Risk of Reaching Time Limit	Other Adults on the Welfare Caseload in 2000	Difference
Number of Clients with VIEW Evaluation	4,010	37,092	
<i>Percent of Screened Clients with Employment Issue:</i>			
Health Conditions (Physical/Mental)	37	28	+9
Literacy/Learning Difficulties	18	15	+3
Substance Abuse Issues	13	12	+1
Family Violence	9	9	0
Legal Problems	9	9	0
Child Care Unavailable	28	29	-1
Transportation Problems	29	32	-3
Housing Instability	14	18	-4

Clients at high risk of reaching the time limit had a 9 percent higher rate of health issues compared with other welfare recipients. Thirty-seven percent of the high-risk adults reported a “physical, behavioral, or emotional condition” that made it difficult to find and keep a job.

Nearly 30 percent of clients at high risk of reaching time limits reported difficulties with child care or transportation. This rate, however, was not any higher than the percentage of the overall caseload reporting child care and transportation problems. Finally, high-risk clients did not have a significantly higher rate of family violence issues compared with the caseload on average.

⁶ The assessment screening questions that were considered for this report are shown in Appendix B.

WorkFirst Participation

High-risk clients currently have about two years until they become potentially ineligible for benefits as a result of the five-year time limit. This section examines types of activities these clients have been engaged in since starting WorkFirst. In general, high-risk clients have a recurring pattern of Job Search entries and have spent a majority of their time since starting WorkFirst in non work-related activities.

Job Search

When WorkFirst clients begin the program, they are referred to the Employment Security Department for Job Search, where they must participate in a workshop that prepares them to seek employment. On completion of the workshop, they must actively seek employment by making a minimum number of employer contacts as specified by the local WorkFirst office. Since the inception of WorkFirst in 1997, Job Search has been one of the most frequently used WorkFirst services.

Given the overall importance of Job Search activities, we examined the Job Search participation of clients at high risk of reaching the five-year limit. We found:

- ✓ Overall, 81 percent of high-risk clients participated in Job Search at some point.
- ✓ 53 percent of these high-risk clients started Job Search three or more times.
- ✓ This compares to only 35 percent of other recipients currently on the caseload who have participated in Job Search three or more times.⁷

Sanction

WorkFirst adults who are able, but unwilling, to participate in required activities are subject to financial sanctions. We analyzed financial sanctions for clients who are at high-risk of reaching the time limit and found:

- ✓ Almost one-third had received a sanction in the past three years. Only 15 percent of all other recipients on the caseload had ever been sanctioned.
- ✓ Among high-risk recipients with a sanction (2,109 recipients), 32 percent (679) stayed in sanction status for 6 months or longer (compared with 17 percent of all other sanctioned recipients).

⁷ Comparisons of WorkFirst activities should be interpreted cautiously because high-risk client have remained on the caseload longer, which gives them an opportunity to participate in more activities.

Overall WorkFirst Participation

After analyzing Job Search participation and sanction rates, we looked at how clients have spent their time overall while in WorkFirst. Potential activities for WorkFirst clients include job-related training or education, Job Search, and employment. WorkFirst clients may also have periods of inactivity as a result of deferral, sanction, exemption, or non-participation. Analyzing the level of activity for clients currently on the caseload shows:

- All WorkFirst clients, including those at high risk of reaching the time limit, have spent over half their time (60 percent) since starting WorkFirst in non work-related activities. Clients at high-risk of reaching the time limit, however, have been on the caseload longer and have longer *total* periods of inactivity.
- On average, clients currently on the caseload have spent about 10 percent of total time since starting WorkFirst in Job Search. But, as previously shown, high-risk clients participated in job search more often.
- Clients at high risk of reaching the time limit have spent less time employed while on welfare (14 percent of total time since starting WorkFirst) compared with the rest of the current caseload (20 percent).

APPENDIX A: STATISTICAL ADJUSTMENTS

To determine who may reach the five-year time limit, we must take into account two important factors. First, Washington's welfare system has changed dramatically with the 1997 implementation of WorkFirst. New participation guidelines and changes in eligibility requirements coincide with far fewer long-term welfare recipients compared with the pre-WorkFirst era. To gauge the impact of time limits, we must focus exclusively on the period after 1997.

Second, we must account for observable changes in the circumstances of WorkFirst clients. As welfare recipients gain more work experience or receive consistent child support, they are less likely to remain on welfare.

Study Population and Data. We selected all adults on Washington's welfare caseload (approximately 100,000) when the TANF time clock started. The Automated Clients Eligibility System (ACES) was used to identify clients during the first month they received TANF benefits (August 1997 to December 1997). ACES provided information on family composition, marital status, place of residence, and previous welfare history. These data were matched with records from the JOBS Automated System (JAS) and the Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage file. Data on educational background and WorkFirst activity are found in JAS. UI wage files provided information on client's previous work history and wages. Finally, records from the Support Enforcement Management System (SEMS) were used to determine child support payment history for each client.

Statistical Controls. This analysis controls for a variety of factors that may influence the total time a client stays on welfare. Local economic conditions, for instance, may affect the ability of a client to leave welfare. Similarly, individual characteristics (such as age and educational level), family composition (total adults in the household and age of children), previous welfare and employment history, and income sources (wages and child support) may also influence length of stay on welfare.

Modeling Process. Logistic regression models were constructed to estimate the probability of receiving welfare for two years in a three-year time period. Since welfare usage differs significantly by gender, separate models for males and females were constructed. Thirty percent of long-term recipients remained on welfare for the entire three years (1997-2000) without leaving. A second model predicted the likelihood of staying on welfare continuously among the long-term recipients.

We then selected adults on the welfare caseload between October 1999 and September 2000 and used the models to estimate the probability that adults currently on the caseload will remain on welfare for two of the next three years. Adding predicted time on welfare to time already on the caseload, we can estimate the number of adults at high risk of reaching the five-year time limit. In addition to significant factors identified in the models, descriptive information about this high-risk population is compared with other adults currently on the caseload.

APPENDIX B: WORKFIRST SCREENING QUESTIONS*

Child/Dependent Care

- If you were to get a job today, do you need help finding child care that is safe and dependable, including a back-up plan?
- If you have child care, do you need help paying for it?
- If you provide care for any other family member in your household, do you need help finding safe and dependable care for this family member so that you can work?

Transportation

- Do you need our help to find a reliable way to get back and forth to a job, to look for work every day or to develop a back-up plan?
- Do you need help with the costs of your transportation?

Housing

- Are you homeless, facing eviction, in temporary housing or do you have other problems with your housing that make it hard to find or keep a job?

Legal

- Do you or does anyone in your family have any legal issues that might make it hard to find or keep a job?

Health

- Do you or does anyone in your family, including children, have any physical, behavioral or emotional conditions that make it hard for you to find or keep a job?

Literacy/Learning

- Do you need help obtaining your High School diploma or GED certificate?
- Do you have problems reading or writing?

Learning Disabilities:

- Did you receive special help in school?
- Do you have problems filling out forms?
- Have you, or your children, ever been evaluated for or diagnosed as having a learning disability?

Limited English Proficient:

- Do you have difficulty speaking, reading or writing in English?

Substance Abuse

- Does alcohol or drug use by you or other family members make it hard for you to find or keep a job?

Family Planning

- Do you need to talk with our family planning worker about how an additional pregnancy will affect your ability to find or keep a job?

Family Violence

- Do you need immediate help to escape from someone who is hurting you or your children or from someone who is stalking you?
- Do you need to keep your address secret?
- Are you being mentally, physically or emotionally hurt or has a family member or partner mentally, physically, or emotionally hurt you?
- Is a family member or partner controlling you?
- Are you staying or have you recently stayed in a domestic violence shelter?
- Are you afraid to leave your children at school or in childcare because of your partner or the other parent?
 - Have you ever gotten a protection order?

**This represents the assessment screening questions that were considered for this report.*