

GIVE US OUR DAILY BREAD

The changing faces of welfare in Santa Cruz County

Statistics ... show a picture dramatically different from the welfare queens and teen-age baby breeders haunting the national debate on welfare reform.

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S. Cruz Sentinel
July 16, 1995

Exploding the myth

Welfare recipients don't fit images

First in a three-part series

By KATHY KREIGER
Sentinel staff writer

FOR MELISSA McKOWAN, 35, of Ben Lomond, it was a way out of a party-girl lifestyle as a bartender who made \$200 a night but worked late, boozed through the night and barely saw her son.

"I count my blessings every day, because I know what it's like to not have any blessings."

For Anita Henri, 45, of Santa Cruz, it was a way to earn her high school diploma, her junior college degree, a bachelor's degree and, last month, a master's degree — not to mention the self-respect she says she missed as a child who washed the dishes while her brother did his homework.

"I'm not ashamed. I'm not proud, but I'm doing everything I can do. I'm not doing anything wrong."

For Claudia Amezquita, 28, Watsonville, it was a way to stay home with her two young sons instead of leaving them with someone else while she worked a minimum-wage job.

"I was wanting to stay with my kids when they were little and since that program was available, why not take advantage of it?"

And for Harold Griffith, 46, Watsonville, it was a way of life he's still trying to get out of from under, 30 years after his father's nervous breakdown left his mother with six children to feed.

"I didn't like welfare then and I don't like it now."

WELFARE.

Love it or hate it, the welfare system as we now know it is about to be reshaped by a powerful combination of public distaste and politicians anxious to ride that mood to further their own agendas. Republicans and even Democrats now seem eager to be the first to attack the welfare system that has been in place since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The images stick in the national craw: the woman wearing brand-name tennis shoes who pulls out food stamps to buy her T-bone steaks. The squalling



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Anita Henri, nine years on welfare: 'There's nothing I want more than to get off.'

broods of brats, churned out year after year by overweight women trying to keep that welfare check coming in. The drug addict who sells his food stamps to buy more dope, the teen-ager who sees a baby as her ticket out from under the parental roof, the "gimme" attitude instead of gratitude.

This nation of immigrants, many of whom came here with nothing, is not in a mood to be generous with the less fortunate.

As a country weaned on tales of millionaires who hauled themselves up by their bootstraps — after working and scrimping to buy the bootstraps in the first place — Americans are at best impatient with those who ask for help from the public treasury.

But how do the images stack up against the reality? A Sentinel review of local, state and federal documents and statistics turned up the following picture of welfare in Santa Cruz County:

- Few welfare families here are headed by teen-age moms.
- Most recipients are on welfare less than three years.
- Welfare mothers are having babies out of wedlock. But so is everyone else.
- The person in the welfare line here is increasingly likely to be Hispanic — and increasingly does not speak English.
- Non-citizens may not be eligible for welfare, but they collect it just the same on behalf of their U.S.-born children.
- The working poor make up a sizable chunk of those on welfare.

Those whose daily bread has been welfare mostly say they're grateful for the helping hand. But

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TODAY: As the cry goes out for reform, the people who receive government assistance in Santa Cruz County defy some of the stereotypes.

MONDAY: Guarding the integrity of the system: catching welfare cheats.

TUESDAY: Getting ready for welfare reform: What the county is doing to get welfare recipients back on their feet.

none can forget quickly the liberal seasonings of shame and humiliation that made it hard to swallow.

"People will make comments," said Henri. "Like one time when I bought half a pound of jumbo shrimp. I had this woman say to me, 'Look at this, I can't afford shrimp and you get it free.'"

Mom on AFDC: 'I'm not ashamed'

By KATHY KREIGER
Sentinel staff writer

WHEN THEY GO food shopping, her 14-year-old daughter has one question: 'Are you going to use food stamps?'

If the answer is yes, she won't go along.

After nine years receiving Aid to Families of Dependent Children, Anita Henri, 45, knows firsthand the special scorn reserved for welfare recipients.

Total strangers criticize what she buys at the grocery, and even her relatives, who don't know she's on welfare, make snide comments about "disgusting" people on welfare.

"They feel, why should they pay for me, when they have to work. Why should they pay taxes?" she said. "... There's nothing I want more than to get off welfare. The stigma, it's nasty."

But the end is in sight, she said earlier this year, as she prepared for an oral defense of the thesis on gender equity she wrote for her master's degree from UC Santa Cruz.

And it won't come any too soon

Welfare myths

Continued from A1

Which really angered me, because I've always borne her out. Statistics bear her out. For most welfare recipients in Santa Cruz County, time on the public dole is a relatively brief interlude in an otherwise work-a-day life.

Born in the '30s

THE PRESENT-DAY welfare system began as part of the federal Social Security Act of 1935. Known as Aid to Dependent Children, the program later had the word "families" added to the title. The Depression-era program was intended to feed, clothe and house children whose parents could not work. Whether that was the result of parental incapacity, death, absence or unemployment, the underlying idea was children should not suffer because of their parents' circumstances.

More than half the money proping up the system comes from the federal government, with state government paying the rest; both of course are funded by you, the taxpayer. The tab comes to more than \$60 billion a year nationally when the costs of food stamps and medical care are added to the \$23 billion worth of AFDC.

States run the programs, deciding who is eligible and how much they should get.

California is clearly a major player in the welfare debate: one in five U.S. residents on welfare lives in the state — nearly five million AFDC cases in all.

Nearly one in four welfare dollars is spent here. That's \$6.1 billion of the \$22.7 billion spent nationally in fiscal year 1994.

And no wonder: the average monthly AFDC payment in California last year was \$558.15 — nearly 50 percent higher than the national average of \$379.65. Benefits ranged from a low of \$119.97 a month in Mississippi to a high of \$734.94 in Alaska.

In Santa Cruz County, the tab for welfare and related services ran close to \$39 million in the past fiscal year. That includes \$25 million worth of AFDC checks. It does not include the value of food stamps or medical services provided.

All but \$2 million of those welfare dollars came from the state and federal governments, however.

Looked at in the context of the entire \$300 million in state, federal and local funds spent here, welfare makes up 13 percent of the spending. But looking only at the local part of those dollars (\$60 million), welfare makes up 3 percent of the spending.

But numbers are only part of the story, says the man who runs the county AFDC system.

"We're trying to compensate for the destruction of the family," said Will Lightbourne. As head of the county's Human Resources Agency, Lightbourne is charged with dispensing welfare, protecting children and administering a host of other social service programs. "No rational person would design the system we have now."

Like some other things designed in the 1930s, the system has had difficulty making the transition to the 1990s, he said.

AFDC was geared to help the widow and the orphan in a society where men brought home the bread and women raised the children.

"It was perfectly good for the 1930s," he said.

Then came the souring of the U.S. economy, the loss of blue-

collar jobs to other countries, the widespread availability and acceptance of divorce, the women joining the work force and the growth of the two-income family.

"Now it doesn't work as well," Lightbourne said. "... We're asked to supply the love and the strength, the encouragement and the admonition of those missing families."

While he criticizes the welfare system, Lightbourne is eager to explode some of the myths about those who use its services.

His comments mirror what statistics say about AFDC in this community.

Welfare, local style

SOME 4,000 FAMILIES in the county rely on AFDC at any given time. Including children, that works out to more than 11,000 people, or about 5 percent of the county's 230,000 residents.

That's less than half of the county residents (25,000) who live in poverty, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

In all, statistics show that 11 percent of county residents live in poverty — somewhat lower than the statewide 12.5 percent poverty rate.

Statistics drawn from the 1990 U.S. Census, the state Department of Social Services, and the county show a picture dramatically different from the welfare queens and teen-age baby breeders haunting the national debate on welfare reform.

The average AFDC family here is a woman with two children. She is almost equally likely to be Hispanic or white, and she will spend less than three years supported by public dollars.

At the same time, welfare workers are tracking several emerging trends in the AFDC rolls: an explosion in the number of Hispanics on welfare, an increase in those who don't speak English and an increase in the numbers of working poor who make so little money that they qualify for welfare. That includes two-parent families, yet another group of welfare recipients in this area of low-paying service jobs and high-cost housing.

Not for a lifetime

STATISTICS explode the following welfare myths, at least locally:

- For the most part, welfare recipients in Santa Cruz County are not teen moms.

Less than 1 percent of the heads of AFDC households — about 40 of the 4,000 cases — are under 18. Just over 10 percent, or 400, are ages 18-22. Most heads of welfare households here — 62 percent — are between 22 and 40 years old.

Another 17 percent are in their 40s, and 11 percent are between 18 and 22.

Those percentages have not changed over the past five years.

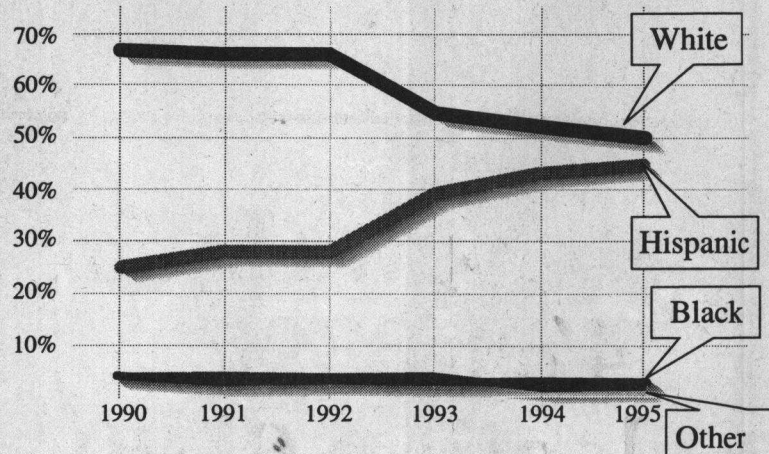
- Very few county residents spend their lifetimes on welfare. In fact, most are off welfare faster than the statewide average.

More than one-third of the AFDC families here are on and off welfare in less than a year. Another third receive benefits between one and three years. The figures taper off beyond that: 14 percent, three to five years; 11 percent, five to 10 years.

Just 3 percent — 120 families — are on welfare longer than 10 years. That works out to some 330 individuals out of the 230,000 residents tallied in the 1990 census —

Santa Cruz County AFDC adult recipients

As shown below, the Hispanic segment of the AFDC recipient population has grown while the white segment has decreased. Other categories have remained essentially unchanged.



Source: Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency

less than 2/10 of 1 percent.

Multigeneration welfare families may be the reality elsewhere, but statistics say they aren't here. Again, county figures show that those percentages have changed very little in the past five years.

Statewide, only half the AFDC recipients are off welfare in less than three years, compared to the 72 percent in Santa Cruz.

The number of longterm welfare recipients statewide (8 percent) is nearly three times greater than the number here (3 percent).

- Their families are the same size as everyone else's. Some 4,000 AFDC households made up of 11,000 individuals works out to an average of 1.75 kids per household, for a total of 2.75 people per household.

That's pretty close to the 2.7 people per household counted in the average Santa Cruz County household by the 1990 census.

Illegitimacy is another hot button in the welfare reform debate.

But the numbers show another side. Out-of-wedlock babies represent a social trend that cuts across social and economic classes. The poor are having babies without getting married, but so are the middle class and the rich.

According to statistics quoted in a March Newsweek article, just 2 percent of all white babies born in 1960 in America were out of wedlock. By 1991, that figure had jumped to 22 percent. The figures for black babies tripled, from 22 percent of all black births in 1960 to 68 percent in 1991.

"At some point, social norms changed," wrote journalist Robert Samuelson. "'Illegitimacy' became acceptable."

Other trends

AT THE SAME TIME, statistics reveal the following trends here:

- Increasingly, Hispanics are in the AFDC line.

Over the past five years, the Spanish-surnamed section of the AFDC caseload has doubled, going from one in four in 1990 to one in two this year.

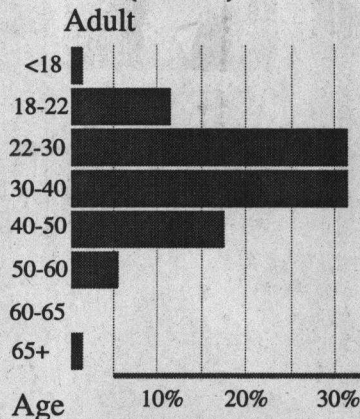
It's more extreme in South County. There, 81 percent of AFDC recipients are Hispanic while 17 percent are white.

That's nearly an exact reversal of the county's over-all racial make-up (74 percent white, 20 percent Hispanic).

Statistically, although Hispanics made up 20 percent of the county's population in 1990, they accounted for 36 percent of its poor. Whites, in contrast, represented 74 percent of the general population but 37 of its poor.

- The Latinization of Santa Cruz is reflected in another statistic: the growth in non-English-speaking

Santa Cruz County AFDC recipients by age (1995)



Source: Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency

AFDC recipients.

As recently as three years ago, 20 percent of the county's welfare recipients said they preferred to speak in Spanish, with 8 percent indicating limited English-speaking skills.

By this year, 30 percent, or almost one in three, said they only speak Spanish.

- More non-citizens benefit from welfare. Non-citizens technically are barred from receiving AFDC benefits for themselves, but can collect them on behalf of their American-born children.

County statistics show 490 of what are called "child-only" AFDC cases, Lightbourne said. At least some of those cases, perhaps 70, involve a needy child being raised by non-needy parents: for example, someone raising grandchildren.

However, program managers estimate that about 420 cases — 10 percent of the total AFDC caseload here — involve undocumented parents.

- More two-parent families are on welfare. Of the 4,000 AFDC families in the county, about one in four, or more than 1,000, report earned income.

"It's a reflection of our seasonal economy," Lightbourne said of the increasing numbers of working poor who rely on welfare at least part of the year.

Fieldworkers and hotel maids alike find themselves unemployed at least part of the year. Typically, he said, such two-parent welfare families have exhausted their unemployment benefits and still don't have a job.

"The sad reality is we have entered the world of economic apartheid," he said. "There are winners and there are losers. We have a population cycling between the labor market and public assistance."

Mom on welfare

Continued from Page A1

for her teen-age daughter and son, she said.

"They're entitled to free lunches but they've never taken one," she said. "You get a special lunch ticket, and they get teased." Instead, they take lunch from home, she said, or skip it and come home to raid the refrigerator.

Her response?

"I'm not ashamed," she said. "I'm not proud, but I'm doing everything I can do. I'm not doing anything wrong."

Welfare has provided her daily bread since her husband left her and their two children and fled the state.

"What I say is, it's not my choice. I did not choose to get divorced. ... I say, the state is stepping in for their dad. They're taking the dad's place. I'm doing everything I can." In effect, she points out, the state is subsidizing her ex-husband.

While on welfare, the former high school dropout has picked up — with honors — her associate's degree from a community college and her bachelor's degree from UC Santa Cruz, where she carried a double major in English/American literature and women's studies.

Last month, she received her master's degree in education from UCSC. She skipped the ceremony, to save the \$38 rental for the cap and gown.

"I feel like a million bucks, because I have my education," Henri said. "But I couldn't have done it without welfare."

If some welfare reformers have their way, such an extensive education may soon be a thing of the past for AFDC recipients. Instead, the emphasis will be on training that leads more quickly to jobs.

And that's too bad, says Sheila De Lany, who's worked with Henri on a task force on gender equity sponsored by the county Women's Commission.

"It didn't produce somebody who was willing to work for minimum wage and be grateful," De Lany said. "It produced somebody who's thinking, and working to make conditions better for girls so that they may not get into those problems in the first place."

Henri said it's been a long journey.

"I was a high school dropout. I quit when I was 16. I got married, had a bunch of kids, wound up divorced and wound up on welfare."

Born and raised in New York, she remembers her mother favoring her brothers. She had to wash the dishes or set the table while her brother did his homework.

School seemed irrelevant, boring.

"I didn't think I could do the work. I came from a lower-income family, although my mother was never on welfare," she said. "I was very self-conscious, not having the clothes, not having new school supplies. I didn't fit in. I grew up in the Bronx, and I never thought what they were teaching had anything to do with me. What did Napoleon have to do with me?"

She left school in 1965. Her mother's response: "Well, you'll probably get married anyway. As long as you know how to type, you can get a job."

After an unsavory street life back East, Henri came to California in 1974 and met and married

the man she thought she would be with forever. She worked as a draftsman for an engineering company, doing computer-aided design work. "I always thought I would be set."

Then came the two children. And the divorce.

"My ex-husband ran away to Texas," she said. "I have never gotten one penny of child support. We were divorced in 1983, and he was supposed to pay \$300 a month. I filed for divorce and he signed the papers. Now he lives on his parents' farm and works for them. So they never show any income when they check his Social Security number."

When she applied for welfare in Seaside, her son was 5 and her daughter was 3.

"(The welfare department) didn't make it easy," she said. "They actually said, 'You're healthy, you should be working.'"

As soon as her daughter went to kindergarten, Henri enrolled at Monterey Peninsula College. Two years later, she graduated and came here to attend UCSC.

"Up here in Santa Cruz, nobody has ever really harassed me, or made me feel badly," she said. "There was more of a push in Monterey to get you off (welfare) at any cost. In Santa Cruz, they're really interested in the long term."

While in school, she's been active in the Take Our Daughters to Work activities, and did a study on sexual harassment. During summers, she's helped with UCSC's Bridge Program assisting minority students make the transition from high school to college. Active with the county Women's Commission, she is now putting together a grant proposal to coordinate gender equity compliance for the county Office of Education.

She's learned, she says, about the role of racism, and sexism, under a capitalistic system, and the importance of an underclass that accepts minimum wages and won't fight back.

"I now have a much better understanding of class issues, my parents, and their difficulties. They were immigrants," she said. "I can think critically now in ways I never could before. That may be one reason that people who are poor never get a chance. ... If I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have wasted 20 years."

At this point, however, she is looking to the future, not the past.

Degrees in hand, she plans to spend the summer getting her resume out and looking for work.

She looks forward to a career as a gender equity specialist, perhaps consulting with the county or the school districts, or to teaching on the college level. She's crossing her fingers on a grant application that would let her coordinate gender equity efforts in the local school system.

She owes \$40,000 in student loans, and will have to begin paying them back in September. She'll also have to leave UC student housing where she and her children have lived for seven years. That means finding an apartment she can afford. Not an easy task, she says, when you've been waiting for Section 8 housing since 1990 — and the list is just up to 1988.

"I just take it one step at a time," she said. "I want to be a good citizen."