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## West Coast Poverty Center

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

A Partnership of the SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK,

the DANIEL J. EVANS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS and the COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

## Poverty Research Flash

**Highlighting New  
Poverty Research****by Marieka Klawitter,  
Shannon Harper, Taryn  
Lindhorst, and Marcia K.  
Meyers**

“Final Report: Sanction Policies in Washington State’s WorkFirst Program,” West Coast Poverty Center. Available online at [www.wcpc.washington.edu](http://www.wcpc.washington.edu)

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The West Coast Poverty Center’s “POVERTY RESEARCH FLASH” highlights new research by Center faculty affiliates on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality. More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: [www.wcpc.washington.edu](http://www.wcpc.washington.edu)

November 2007

**Welfare and Work Requirements:  
The Use of Sanctions in Washington State**

**Background.** The majority of states have chosen to impose “full-family” sanctions, which end a family’s welfare benefits after some period of noncompliance with welfare work requirements. In doing so, states have raised the costs of noncompliance and increased the importance of understanding how sanctions are used by state administrators and caseworkers as well as whether various subpopulations of clients are disproportionately affected by their application. Under contract with the Washington State Department of Social and Human Services, Marieka Klawitter, Shannon Harper, Marcia Meyers, and Taryn Lindhorst examined the application of sanctions in Washington over a period where sanction penalties were increasing in severity to determine how case, client, office, and local characteristics influence sanctions and sanction outcomes.

**Methods.** The researchers combine administrative data on a longitudinal, state-wide sample of 12,137 new welfare cases drawn every six months from January 2003 through January 2007 with data on the service and staffing practices of local welfare offices and characteristics of the counties in which clients live. Because welfare clients are only at risk of sanction while they are on welfare, the authors use multivariate hazard analyses to model the probability of either being sanctioned for the first time or leaving welfare before being sanctioned.

**Key Findings.** Consistent with prior research, the researchers find that most welfare clients exit the rolls quickly: roughly half of new clients exit within six months and more than eighty percent of clients exit welfare within one year. As would be expected, a client’s risk of sanction increases with the amount of time spent on welfare. While individual clients’ risk of sanction increased as they spent more months on welfare, the results showed that, over all, clients were less likely to be sanctioned as the penalties for noncompliance increased over time. Prior to 2006, roughly 15 percent of entering clients had been sanctioned within one year after entry; by two years after entry, the proportion of clients who had been sanctioned at least once leveled off at roughly 25 percent. Following the announcement of a full-family sanction and improvements in up-front assessment practices, the sanction rates for new welfare clients dropped by more than half: among cases that entered in January 2006, 6 percent had been sanctioned at least once within a year.

The declining likelihood of entering sanctions over time could be the result of either caseworker or client actions; additional analyses suggest that client behavior did not change significantly over time while caseworkers responded to increasing penalties for noncompliance by increasing their rates of deferrals and exemptions from work requirements. Accordingly, a better understanding of how sanctions are implemented and how caseworkers respond to sanction penalties may be warranted.

The multivariate hazard analyses partially confirm previous research in finding that clients with lower levels of education and those in single-adult households were at greater risk of being sanctioned. Some prior studies in other states have also found that minority clients are at higher risk of sanction. This study did not find significant differences in sanction risk at a point in time by race or ethnicity in Washington State, but did reveal differences in total risk due to time on welfare. Hispanic and Asian clients were moderately more likely to exit welfare without a sanction than white clients, while African American clients were less likely to exit without a sanction than white clients. Therefore, while they are no more likely to be sanctioned at a point in time, by remaining on welfare longer than other clients, African American clients remain at risk of sanction longer. These findings suggest that the impact of race and ethnicity on sanction risk is complex and varies with both the likelihood of welfare exit and with the state and local context.

# Poverty Research Flash

**The West Coast Poverty Center** serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the west coast states. The Center, located at the University of Washington, is one of three regional poverty centers funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Education (ASPE). More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: [www.wcpc.washington.edu](http://www.wcpc.washington.edu)

## Poverty Research Flash 2007-02

### **Welfare and Work Requirements: The Use of Sanctions in Washington State**

**New research from Marieka Klawitter, Shannon Harper, Taryn Lindhorst, and Marcia K. Meyers**

#### **Key findings:**

- Like many states, Washington has increased the severity of its welfare sanction policies over time.
- After full-family sanction and improvements in up-front assessment practices were announced, the sanction rates for new welfare clients in Washington State dropped by more than half.
- The implementation of up-front assessments and a state-wide mandate to review sanctioned cases may have helped reduce sanction rates. The data suggest that while client behavior did not change significantly over time, caseworkers responded to increasing penalties for noncompliance by increasing their rates of deferrals and exemptions from work requirements.
- Sanction risk at a point in time did not vary by race or ethnicity in Washington State, but by remaining on welfare longer than other clients, African American clients remained at risk of sanction longer.

***For more information about this study, see inside.***