

Call for Papers for an Issue on:

Three Decades since *Making Ends Meet*:
What We Know about How Single-Mother Families Survive Today

Edited by

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In their 1997 book *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*, Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein drew new attention to the economic survival strategies of welfare-reliant single mothers in the early 1990s, a time when federal cash assistance (albeit in many states only a very low floor), was a commonly-used and universally available entitlement (see Edin’s Institute for Research on Poverty [podcast](#)). Edin and Lein conducted innovative in-depth repeated interviews across 4 U.S. cities with 214 welfare-reliant mothers and a comparison sample of 165 low-income mothers who were not receiving welfare but working low-wage jobs. They obtained detailed accounts of how these mothers packaged income from welfare, work and other sources to “make ends meet.” Interviews revealed that, even in the more generous states, it was virtually impossible for mothers to live on welfare and in-kind benefits (i.e. Food Stamps (now called SNAP), Medicaid, WIC, and, occasionally, housing subsidies) alone. The book documented how these mothers struggled to stretch these formal sources of support while supplementing this income from a myriad of informal sources. Half the women were working off the books to supplement their welfare benefits; many also relied on charitable sources of support with stringent rules, small amounts of cash and in-kind help from family and friends, and inconsistent assistance from the children’s father. This in-depth qualitative study was widely read and led the way for many new studies in this field, both qualitative and quantitative.

In many ways, it has gotten even harder in the decades since for the very poorest to get by. Though welfare programs have always varied from state to state, many other policies meant to support

low income families with children have devolved to the states as well. Today, there are 51 or more variations of many of these programs (50 state programs plus one in the District of Columbia; this does not include differences specific to tribal territories, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Virgin Islands). Even within a given jurisdiction, programs rules do not work in concert, much less from state to state or from year to year. More importantly, the 1996 welfare reform and subsequent policy changes at the federal and state levels have rendered cash welfare (now called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF) virtually nonexistent in many communities, as documented in subsequent work by Edin and Shaefer (2015). According to a 2022 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities chartbook, cash welfare benefits went to 68 of every 100 families with children in poverty in 1996 but to only 21 of every 100 poor families with children in 2020. Even for those accessing TANF, the maximum level of benefit in 2021 for a family of 3 covered only 11–19 percent of the federal poverty line (FPL) in most Southern states. Even among the more generous states—California, New York, and New Hampshire—the maximum benefit covered only 40–60 percent of the FPL. Neither before nor after welfare reform could a welfare check lift a family out of poverty, due to meager benefit levels. However, a poor family with children was more than three times as likely to actually receive cash relief before the 1996 reform as in more recent years. Instead, spending has shifted toward work supports (i.e. state EITCs, childcare) and many other purposes (e.g. college scholarships, crisis pregnancy centers) not aimed at increasing the wellbeing of poor families with children.

Without access to cash benefits, such families must subsist on in kind benefits such as Medicaid and SNAP plus whatever they can glean from sporadic work, friends and family, and private charity (Edin and Shaefer 2015). While in-kind assistance promotes child wellbeing (for example, Bitler, Hoynes, and Schanzenbach, 2020), it can be difficult to access (Barnes and Henly, 2018; Barnes 2021; Barnes, Michener, and Rains, 2023). For example, studies demonstrate how stigmatizing experiences with these programs, along with their complicated application and recertification processes, deter program participation (Herd and Moynihan, 2018; Barnes, Michener, and Rains, 2023). Even when families successfully gain access these programs, their restrictive nature (they can only be used to procure specific goods and services such as health care and food) means that they cannot possibly support families who have no other sources of support (Edin and Schaefer, 2015).

The work-based safety net that has supplanted TANF, including the refundable Earned Income Tax Credit, have expanded and now provide greater relief to the working poor than in the *Making Ends Meet* era, keeping many work-reliant mothers afloat (Halpern-Meekin et al. 2014), with benefits for child development (Barr et al. 2022). But work supports do not help those at the very bottom, who struggle to maintain stable employment (Danziger et al. 2016). Further, work-based subsidies may push parents toward jobs that are perilous (Edin and Shaefer 2015). Workers are plagued with erratic shifts and

insufficient hours (Ananat and Gassman-Pines, 2019; Schneider and Harknett, 2019). Wage theft (Hallett, 2018) and employee misclassification are rampant. Furthermore, many low-wage jobs are unsafe, and can lead to work-related injuries.

This volume will include an introductory chapter by the editors that describes: how the 51+ TANF block grant programs have evolved and diverged in spending, rules, and size and characteristics of caseloads since 1996; trends in the lived experiences of low-income single mother families since that time, including how, in a largely post-welfare world, they are managing to make ends meet; what demographic shifts in the composition of poor Americans mean for the impact of a program that has historically been restricted to mostly single parents in deep poverty; the changing context of other anti-poverty and/or child-focused means-tested programs, including those administered through the tax system; the growing bodies of research on the long-term payoffs of anti-poverty programs and on the challenges in accessing them; and the current public perception of recipients and poor non-recipients of TANF and other antipoverty programs.

For this volume, we hope to solicit papers that illustrate how research on poor families headed by single parents (and low income families with children more broadly) and the policies that serve them has dramatically expanded after *Making Ends Meet*. We seek articles across a wide range of disciplines that use qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Questions we hope to see addressed include (but are not limited to):

- How have low-income single parent families fared economically in the years since the book's publication, particularly in recent years?
 - We encourage papers that focus on the post 2000 period; most extant research on welfare reform was conducted before 2000 (Tach and Edin 2017).
 - We encourage papers that focus on the aftermath of the Great Recession, as the post-reform welfare system was stress-tested by the worst downturn since the Great Depression.
 - We encourage papers that focus on low-income families' experiences during the unique stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- How have demographic changes in families, economic and employment trends, and policies altered the character of need among low-income single parent families? We seek papers that consider the implications of population changes for policy design. Both the reality of and research on family structure have been evolving (Cross 2018) and strongly

affect access to resources (Cancian and Reed 2001) in ways that are still not fully understood.

- We invite papers that address the substantial unresolved conceptual and practical issues of how to define families and how race, ethnicity, gender, language and other issues challenge notions of family and household arrangements.
- We encourage papers that consider how differing definitions of eligible families and households across programs exacerbate administrative complexity (Micheltmore and Pilkauskas 2022) at the same time that they raise fundamental questions of fairness (Meyer et al. 2005).
- How have policies (or policy ideas, more broadly) grappled with newer findings about the economic wellbeing of single-parent families and their children?
 - We invite papers that focus not only on the policy shifts in the cash welfare programs but also in other supports such as the EITC, childcare subsidies, and the 2021 expanded Child Tax Credit. Here, state differences in implementation, design, reach and benefit levels come into play, creating wide variation in opportunities for family support strategies.
 - We seek papers that provide analyses of continuing weaknesses in the social safety net from the perspective of whom they serve and how well they serve people at the bottom of the economic ladder in the U.S. Qualitative studies are most poignant here. For example, in more recent work such as *\$2 a Day* (Edin & Shaefer, 2015) and *Abandoned Families* (Seefeldt, 2017), scholars examine the programmatic, community and multi-level policy contexts that create structural barriers to getting ahead, while *Remaking a Life* (Watkins-Hayes, 2019) chronicles how a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS gives Black mothers access to the safety net in ways that were denied them in the past, along with a sense of identity and purpose, allowing them to move from “dying from” to “living with” HIV/AIDS. Here, we hope to include papers that use a variety of methods to highlight the impacts and on-the-ground recipient experiences of policy reforms.
- What new frontiers in understanding the economics of poor households with children have emerged since *Making Ends Meet*? We invite papers that:
 - Examine changing opportunities for parents and children, such as employment policies, tax credits, childcare subsidies, universal pre-K, basic income pilots

- Provide novel insights on the continuing racial, class, ethnic and multiple other forms of oppression of poor parents. Research on poverty and program dilemmas for Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, immigrant, Black and mixed status families has expanded our understanding and challenged our policies.
- How do the politics of social policy making influence a families ability to make ends meet? We invite papers that:
 - Analyze how politics drives institutional/organizational obstacles that support or undermine a family’s ability to make ends meet
 - Examine how recent COVID policy expansions complicates our understanding of deservingness, how families’ experiences the bifurcated welfare state (Mettler 2018; Campbell 2014), and families’ capacity to making ends meet
 - Draw parallels between the politics of welfare reform in the mid 1990s and the current political landscape that impacts families
 - Uncover pockets of resistance or collective strategies that can promote or deter gains for poor (primarily single parent) families
- How does taking a wider view of the stressors facing diverse parents and families challenge conventional wisdom about their survival strategies? We welcome papers that consider:
 - collateral effects of mass incarceration on these families, particularly Black families
 - the economic and child wellbeing impacts of not just poverty but Adverse Child Experiences (ACES) and early trauma
 - the effects of resource scarcity and the stress of poverty on parents’ health and mental health, family and relationships.
 - Immigration status and impacts for survival strategies

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to two pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on July 15, 2023 to:

<https://rsf.fluxx.io>

NOTE that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application at least two days before the deadline.

All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to <https://rsf.fluxx.io> will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org and **not** to the email addresses of the editors of the issue.

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on **June 20-21, 2024** (with a group dinner the night of the 20th). The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 5/22/24**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 10/19/24. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 6/9/25. The full and final issue will be published in the fall of 2025. Papers will be published open access on the RSF website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.

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