

The Nation

Surprise benefits in welfare reform

Marriage rates, incomes rise

By Richard Wolf
USA TODAY

For the first time, researchers have found that moving people from welfare to work can boost marriage rates, reduce domestic violence and help children succeed in school.

A study of Minnesota's welfare reform program offers the best evidence that such programs can do more than cut caseloads by pushing recipients into low-wage, often dead-end jobs. The study, conducted by Manpower Demonstration Research, says the key to Minnesota's success is letting welfare recipients keep some benefits after they go to work. The state also offers tax credits, health insurance and child-care aid.

But there's a catch: Minnesota's program costs from \$1,900

to \$3,800 more per family each year than the state's former welfare program.

"It seems to have strengthened families. It's reduced poverty. What is it we're not to like?" says David Ellwood, a professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

"It's all very good," says Ron Haskins, the top aide on welfare to House Republicans who helped write the federal welfare reform law in 1996. "The issue becomes, how much are you willing to pay?"

Since President Clinton and Congress replaced the New Deal-era welfare system with state-run programs that feature work rules and time limits, welfare rolls have dropped 46%. Fewer than 6.6 million people remain on welfare.

The decline has been steepest in states with the toughest work rules. Wisconsin, Idaho and Wyoming reduced welfare rolls by more than 80%. Minne-

sota cut them by 31%, the sixth smallest drop in the USA.

Still, liberals say it's unclear if most former welfare recipients are better off. Conservatives want evidence that programs are promoting marriage and reducing out-of-wedlock births. The first line of the law reads: "Marriage is the foundation of a successful society."

The Minnesota study, released Wednesday, shows:

► Income of families in the welfare-to-work program was 15% higher than that of those on welfare. About 25% were living above poverty compared with 15% of those on welfare.

► Two-thirds of two-parent families in the work program were married compared with half of those on welfare. About 60% of single parents on welfare were abused, compared with half in the work program.

► The percentage of children ages 5-12 performing poorly in school dropped from 12% to 7%. "A whole bunch of good

things happen when poverty goes down," says Chuck Johnson, director of the Minnesota welfare reform program.

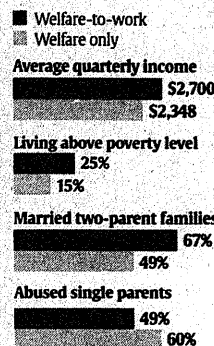
More than 40 states let people keep some benefits after they go to work, but they're not all as generous as Minnesota. A family on welfare in Minnesota can earn \$1,400 a month before benefits end. Alaska and California have higher cutoffs.

Most states also impose five-year time limits on welfare. That leads people to give up benefits when they get a job, in order to preserve the benefits for hard times. As a result, experts say, the Minnesota results might be difficult to replicate. At the time of the study, Minnesota had no time limits.

A few states encourage marriage more directly. Oklahoma is spending \$10 million in federal welfare funds to reduce divorce and out-of-wedlock births. Arkansas offers parenting skills training and marital counseling.

Income, family life better under Minn. welfare-to-work

Minnesota residents in a welfare-to-work program that combined jobs and cash assistance show a marked improvement in their economic and social situations. How they compare after three years with those receiving just welfare:



Source: Manpower Demonstration Research study for the Minnesota Department of Human Services

By Genevieve Lynn, USA TODAY

Skirting the law for a royal flush

1.6-gallon toilets don't do the job like the classic 3.5 model, some say, so they scheme to get an old commode

Rick Hampton
USA TODAY

Except for one thing, the new master bath was a vision from Robin Leach's happier dreams.

It had a glass-walled Jacuzzi with a waterfall; a shower stall with his-and-hers faucets and heads and wood seats; a vaulted ceiling with skylights; a telephone and intercom; mosaic tile walls and heated marble floors; a \$1,000 bidet; a \$600 sink with a \$600 faucet.

And a plain white toilet, \$96 from Home Depot.

But after the municipal building inspector left the premises, the homeowner called plumber Ken Ross. Rip out the toilet, he told him, and replace it with another one I have at the house — an ice-cream Kohler that cost about \$800.

