

Does welfare-to-work work? Depends what you're trying to accomplish.

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Twenty years ago this week, President Clinton signed a bill that replaced the federal government's traditional cash welfare program with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, aka welfare-to-work.

Has this been a success? That depends on your criteria, on what it is you want a welfare program to do.

Under TANF, taxpayers spend less on welfare than we used to. The program's work requirements have the ring of good-old American tough love. And TANF empowered states to decide how to use federal money.

Also, its passage was [a photo-op-worthy moment](#) of smiling bipartisan cooperation.

On the other hand, TANF spends less by *doing* less: it helps fewer people, and helps them less, and for a shorter period of time. Its work requirements haven't had much success in actually promoting employment. And giving states control has meant enabling them to [spend a lot of the money on other stuff instead](#).

As for bipartisanship, [just because both parties want to do something doesn't mean it's a good thing to do](#). Americans tend to celebrate any time the two parties Get Together to Get Things Done. But sometimes the things are terrible, and people would have been better off with a do-nothing Congress just sitting there, doing nothing.

Better yet: do something that actually helps people. Make TANF better; get welfare-to-work to work for our welfare. And build on other programs that have done more than TANF has to help people. [More from Olivia Golden](#), executive director of the Center for Law and Social Policy\*:

Fixing the program means retooling its structure by adding funding, replacing counter-productive incentives, and holding states accountable

for serving the neediest families.

To reduce child poverty, we should build on success. In the 1990s, the strong economy combined with expansions in the Earned Income Tax Credit, child care assistance and health insurance enabled low-income mothers to work. Since then, those programs have worn better than Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

To build on that success, we should expand affordable child care, promote good jobs at decent wages, keep health insurance and nutrition assistance strong, and create a national floor for poor children's income.

But again, such steps only count as progress to those who accept the premise: that the purpose of any welfare reform is to do a better job promoting the people's welfare. Some Americans instead see TANF's limits as not a bug but a feature—i.e., doing less to help poor people was the whole point. And 20 years later, the welfare's mostly gone but [the welfare-shaming continues](#). It's like we [ended welfare as we knew it](#) but we don't even know it, much less the harm this has caused.

\* *Disclosure: I once worked there, briefly.*