

of receiving aid.” “Learnfare,” enacted in 1986, reduced welfare payments to families with truant children. Other reform efforts followed. Since last year, recipients who fail to find private sector jobs have been required to do community service or else see their welfare checks reduced in proportion to the hours they fail to work. Wisconsin also tries to divert new applicants from welfare in the first place.

That’s all very well, says DeParle of the *Times* (May 7, 1997), but “what has happened to the throngs of low-income women and children leaving the [Wisconsin] rolls?” While a small percentage seem to have joined the homeless on the streets or in shelters, he reports, “many more seem to be working in jobs they recently landed or secretly held in the past. Others, weary of the system’s new hassles, have moved in with friends or family, or left the state.”

While work has obvious advantages over welfare dependency, it’s not necessarily all that it’s cracked up to be by reformers. After interviewing 379 low-income single mothers in Chicago and three other cities, Kathryn Edin, a sociologist at Rutgers University, and Laura Lein, a social anthropologist at the University of Texas at Austin, write in *American Sociological Review* (Apr. 1997) that the mothers “generally found it more difficult to make ends meet when they worked than when they collected welfare.” Neither welfare nor the sort of low-wage work available to the women paid enough to cover their monthly bills. To get extra income, which they usually kept hidden from authorities, the welfare recipients worked at jobs on the side, or obtained cash from family members, charities, boyfriends, or the fathers of their children. Employed mothers, in contrast, had expenses (such as child care and transportation) that the welfare mothers did not. Their average monthly

paycheck of \$802 exceeded the other mothers’ welfare income of \$565, but their monthly bills were higher (\$1,243 compared with \$876)—and they had far less time to work at additional jobs or to solicit aid from charities. However, note Edin and Lein, who are the authors of *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work* (1997), working mothers generally were more able than welfare mothers to call on family members or friends for monetary or other help.

But as more and more states tighten time limits on benefits and let them lag behind inflation, the erstwhile welfare recipients who will be pushed into the labor force are likely to be less resourceful and more troubled than the employed mothers Edin and Lein studied, says sociologist Christopher Jencks, a professor at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government.

There will be some, he writes in the *American Prospect* (May-June 1997), whom nobody wants to hire. The new federal law deals with them “by allowing states to exempt up to 20 percent of their caseload from its five-year lifetime limit on welfare receipt.” Wishful thinking, he says. When the inevitable happens and people face cut-offs, liberals are likely to push for “flexible” time limits. This would be a mistake, Jencks believes. “Flexible” limits would tend to make work requirements meaningless, he says. And without such requirements, now that most married mothers work, public support for aid to single mothers will “dry up.”

What to do? Jencks favors reviving “the principle that the government should serve as an employer of last resort.” This is especially important during recessions, and without it, he warns, “states will either have to fudge their time limits or let a lot of destitute families break up.”

## ‘Acting White’

“Weighing the ‘Burden of “Acting White”’: Are There Race Differences in Attitudes toward Education?” by Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, in *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (Spring 1997), John Wiley & Sons, 605 Third Ave., New York, N.Y. 10158.

It is common wisdom these days that many black students underachieve in school because they fear being accused of “acting white.” The thesis was advanced in a 1986 study of a nearly all-black high school in

Washington, D.C. It was echoed in some subsequent studies and later got played up in newspapers and newsmagazines. But the evidence for it as a pervasive nationwide phenomenon “is not compelling,” assert Cook

and Ludwig, professors of public policy at Duke University and Georgetown University, respectively.

They base their case on a study of almost 25,000 public and private school students who were tracked, starting in 1988, from the eighth grade to graduation. The black students' educational aspirations were as high in 1988 as the (non-Hispanic) whites': about 60 percent expected to stay in school and earn a college degree. Four years later, nearly 10 percent of the black students had dropped out, compared with almost seven percent of the white ones—a small difference that disappears when only youths with similar family characteristics (e.g., income, father's presence in the household) were compared.

Black students seem to work as hard as white ones, the authors say. In 1990, 36 percent of black 10th-graders reported skipping a class, 65 percent spent at least two hours a

week on homework, and 28 percent missed (according to school transcripts) more than 10 days of school during the year. Those percentages (unadjusted for family background) were about the same for whites.

Nor were black parents any less involved in their children's education than white parents, as measured by such things as attending school events and checking homework.

High school students are notoriously cliquish, but high-achieving black students do not seem to incur a penalty in popularity among their classmates. The eight percent of black 10th-graders (like the seven percent of white ones) who belonged to academic honor societies were less likely than their classmates to perceive themselves as unpopular. Interestingly, at predominantly white schools, black students' "popularity" was not enhanced by membership in honor societies, while at predominantly black schools, it was.

## *A Good Word for Politics*

The chattering classes's recent enthusiasm for "civil society" is all well and good, historian Gertrude Himmelfarb observes in *Commentary* (May 1997), but something important is often overlooked.

*It is natural and commendable for individuals to seek satisfaction in their families and communities, to make these the center of their emotional ties and moral commitments. But to feel completely fulfilled in these roles and entirely identified with them is to lose that larger sense of national identity which comes not from civil society but from the state and the polity. Today, when politics has been so tainted by cynicism and scandal, and when the state itself has been so perverted by the politics of welfare, the retreat to private and communal life is all too understandable. But it would be most unfortunate if it were to deprive the state of the services, the resources, and the loyalties of its citizens, in peacetime and, more urgently, in wartime.*

## *Why Hitler Hated Bowling Alone*

"Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic" by Sheri Berman, in *World Politics* (Apr. 1997), Bendheim Hall, Princeton, N.J. 08544-1022.

Whether pondering the prospects of democracy in Eastern Europe or fretting about the decline of league bowling in the United States, all latter-day Tocquevilles subscribe to this basic proposition: a vigorous civil society strengthens, and indeed is a crucial prerequisite for, democratic government. But that's not necessarily so, argues Berman, a political scientist at Princeton University. Take the case of Weimar Germany.

Civil society flourished in 19th-century

Germany and grew even stronger, Berman says, during the 1920s, under the democratic Weimar Republic. As middle-class Germans became frustrated with the failures of the national government and the liberal political parties, they "threw themselves into their clubs, voluntary associations, and professional organizations," Berman writes. This, she contends, not only deflected citizens' energies from politics and government, further weakening the republic's democratic institu-