



## *There's No Love in 'Tough Love'*

An important ingredient is missing in the 'tough love' recipe – the love. Tough love refers to the new (actually, old) conventional wisdom that is shaping the design of social programs. It typically gets used in reference to welfare – the income program of last resort. The problem with tough love is that it is all too conventional but none too wise.

The tough-love theme is one of the oldest in social policy history: that the presence of relief will corrupt the moral character of the poor and dampen their incentive to work. The roots of tough love can be traced to the workhouses of 16th century England in which able-bodied persons who required financial assistance were sent to central workhouses to perform menial tasks and various forms of labour as a condition of receiving aid.

The modern-day incarnation of tough love takes the form of workfare – which involves compulsory work or community service in exchange for welfare. *There is nothing wrong with trying to help people move off welfare.* It is not obvious, however, that simplistic workfare is the right response.

If the tough-love crusaders would dismount for a moment from their high horses to examine the evidence, they would find that it is mixed and inconclusive. They also would discover that successful programs tend to incorporate a mix – not the one-size-fits-all workfare approach. In fact, a range of interventions – jobs, skills and supports – is required to address the problems that lie at the heart of welfare 'dependence.'

Welfare-to-work programs cannot be successful unless there are jobs available for their participants. This should come as no surprise; it is seemingly self-evident. But it clearly bears repeating for critics who appear to have forgotten that lack of jobs is the key factor that drives people onto welfare.

Creative solutions to unemployment include access to credit and to technical assistance for microenterprise, self-employment and community economic development. These constructive options receive little government assistance. In fact, job creation programs have been dismantled in some provinces; Ontario, for example, has withdrawn support for small-scale eco-

conomic initiatives in favour of a massive, state-run workfare empire. Does this make any common sense?

The evidence also shows that welfare-to-work programs have positive results when they offer a range of targeted options. Some people need academic upgrading, some require specialized training and others need small amounts of cash to start up a business, buy a license or purchase work-related equipment, such as carpentry tools or work boots. The idea is to tailor selective interventions to individual needs.

Finally, welfare-to-work programs tend to be successful when appropriate supports are available. One of the most important resources is high-quality, affordable child care. Another is assistance for medical or disability-related costs such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, prosthetic equipment, medications or dental benefits. Welfare currently helps pay for these special needs – which makes it difficult for families to leave welfare if their members have a medical or disabling condition or their children require extensive dental care or medications.

Some provinces are taking steps to lower the welfare wall. As part of British Columbia's welfare reform, for example, the Healthy Kids program provides basic dental and vision care benefits for children in low-income working families not covered by an employer-sponsored insurance plan. Families no longer need to be on welfare to receive modest assistance for these essential costs.

Quebec and British Columbia also have replaced their welfare benefits for children with income-tested child benefits payable to all low-

and modest-income families. The intent is to ensure that these families are better off working.

In short, successful welfare-to-work programs involve a multifaceted approach. They take the form of a strategic and intelligent war on poverty – not a simplistic war on the poor. The key issue is context, not moral turpitude.

Unfortunately, it is far easier to blame the people. The tough-lovers like to think the answer is to cure welfare recipients of their 'aversion to work' and to deter future welfare wannabees from a 'free ride.'

Tough-lovers never hesitate when it comes to passing judgment on the poor. But how quickly they bristle when accused of being poor bashers. Tough.

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