

Third Edition

“So You Think I Drive a Cadillac?”

*Welfare Recipients' Perspectives on
the System and its Reform*

Karen Seccombe



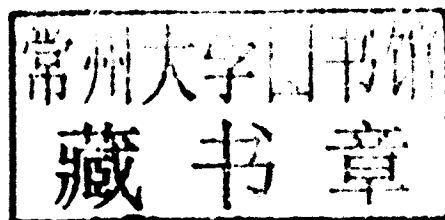
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Karen Seccombe

Portland State University



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Seccombe, Karen

“So you think I drive a Cadillac?” : welfare recipients’ perspectives on the system and its reform / Karen Seccombe.—3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-205-79216-0

ISBN-10: 0-205-79216-2

1. Poor women—United States. 2. Welfare recipients—United States. 3. Public welfare—United States. I. Title.

HV1445.S39 2011

362.5’80973—dc22

2009050804

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 CRS 14 13 12 11 10

Allyn & Bacon
is an imprint of



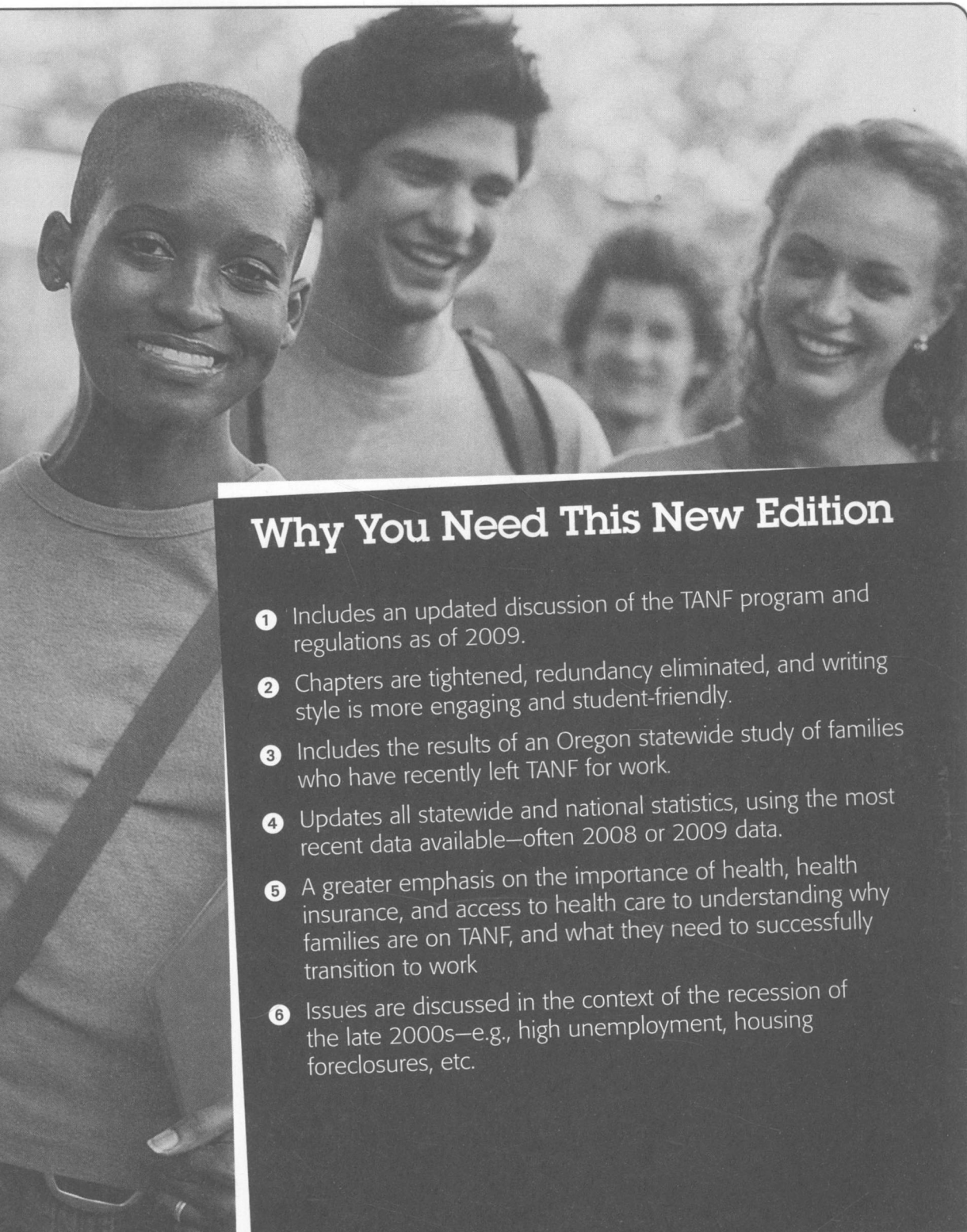
www.pearsonhighered.com

ISBN-10: 0-205-79216-2
ISBN-13: 978-0-205-79216-0

TABLE 1.1 Characteristics of AFDC and TANF Recipients: 1994, 2006 (Percent)

	1994	2006
Race		
White	37	38
Black	36	37
Hispanic	20	20
Age of Adult Recipient		
Under 20	6	7
20–29	44	49
30–39	35	27
40 and over	15	18
Number of Children		
One	43	50
Two	30	27
Three	16	13
Four or more	10	8
Age of Children		
Under 2	15	15
2–5	31	26
6–11	32	31
12–15	15	20
16 and over	7	9
Age of Youngest Child		
Unborn	2	0.6
0–1	11	14
1–2	28	20
3–5	22	19
6–11	23	25
12–15	10	14
16–19	4	7
Adult's Employment Status		
Employed	8	22
Other work Activities (training, job search, other)	_____	23
Education Level		
9 Years or less	_____	13
10–11 Years	_____	29
12 Years	_____	54
More than 12 Years	_____	5
Marital Status		
Single	_____	70
Married	_____	11
Separated	_____	11
Divorced	_____	8
Widowed	_____	0.6
Child Support Receipt		
Percent	_____	10.3
Amount	_____	\$182
Citizenship Status		
U.S. Citizen	_____	94
Qualified Alien	_____	6

Sources: U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, 1996; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009.



Why You Need This New Edition

- ❶ Includes an updated discussion of the TANF program and regulations as of 2009.
- ❷ Chapters are tightened, redundancy eliminated, and writing style is more engaging and student-friendly.
- ❸ Includes the results of an Oregon statewide study of families who have recently left TANF for work.
- ❹ Updates all statewide and national statistics, using the most recent data available—often 2008 or 2009 data.
- ❺ A greater emphasis on the importance of health, health insurance, and access to health care to understanding why families are on TANF, and what they need to successfully transition to work
- ❻ Issues are discussed in the context of the recession of the late 2000s—e.g., high unemployment, housing foreclosures, etc.

PREFACE

I have always been sensitive to social inequality. Growing up in an area of rich and poor neighboring communities, at a very tender age I couldn't help but notice the glaring contrast between those who had more and those who had less. It prompted me to think intellectually about inequality and its causes and consequences. How is our sense of self shaped by the material goods around us? I didn't know that there was a formal discipline that pondered such questions—sociology—or a profession organized to help the casualties of inequality—social work—until much later.

This book provides insight into what it is like to be poor and live on welfare. We hear from lawmakers and policy “experts” about reforms that are needed, but we rarely hear the voices of poor families themselves. We do not hear what the sting of poverty feels like, or how single mothers cope with the stigma and stresses of raising children on meager welfare benefits or low wages. Nor do we know the meanings that women attach to the label of “welfare mother.” Underneath the statistics and the theories are real human beings who are trying to make sense of their lives. While rates, correlations, and causal modes are important to understanding poverty and social inequality, the old adage that “social statistics are humans with their tears washed away” also rings true. This study has been conceptualized and designed with an interpretative sociological framework that emphasizes the centrality of subjective meaning and its importance and connection to the larger social structure.

Welfare programs are based on a patriarchal understanding of women and their roles within the family and the paid labor market. Women's roles are now in a state of flux, and poor women are no longer excused from work to care for their children. Our society values their cheap market labor more than it values their labor at home. We demand that they work, and fill the large number of low-tier service sector jobs that pay only minimum wages and offer no benefits such as health insurance. We ignore the fact that employment of this nature does nothing to lift women and children from poverty.

Because of the insecurity of these jobs, poor women have on again, off again bouts with welfare. Our society is frustrated with these repeat spells of welfare use, and therefore has imposed strict time limits and work requirements. But the real problem with welfare has little to do with lazy women or the structure of the welfare system. Instead, the real problem with welfare is that the structure of low-tier work is so tenuous and insecure that it cannot support a family in any decent manner. The “welfare problem” is best conceptualized as a “work problem.” Until we improve the structure and conditions of low-tier work, poverty will never be reduced or eliminated, and welfare will continue to be a difficult but necessary fact of life for millions of poor families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am fortunate to have had many family members, good friends, and helpful colleagues surrounding me throughout the many years spent on this project. Collectively, they have inspired and motivated me, and have supported my inquiry into the concerns of poor women struggling to raise their families within the confines of welfare and low-wage work.

Naturally, I want to first thank my family, since they have helped me in innumerable ways. My husband Richard read every word of this revised manuscript. His insightful comments prompted me to expand my ideas, and his keen editing skills helped me to express them. I also want to thank my daughters, Natalie Rose, now 9, and Olivia Lin, now 7, who provided the necessary diversions that both drove me crazy and kept me sane.

This research was funded by the National Science Foundation and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Many colleagues and graduate students at the University of Florida and Portland State University assisted in the collection, transcription, and coding of these data. Christina Albo, Cheryl Amey, Sylvia Ansay, Meg Galletly, Cathy Gordon, the dear late Heather Hartley, Kim Hoffman, Richard Lockwood, Goldie MacDonald, Gwen Marchand, Jason Newsom, Clyde Pope, Kim Battle Walters, Janice Weber, and Tosha Zaback were instrumental in this project. Friends and colleagues Beth Miller, Karen Pyke, and Becky Warner faithfully read portions of this manuscript, offered critical advice on these chapters and the book-writing process more generally, and taught me about the meaningful role that qualitative research can play in understanding phenomena and informing policy debates.

Who could possibly be expected to finish a book without the playful interruptions that become all the more imperative when you are tied down to your computer? Friends in Ketchikan, Alaska, provided the scenic wonder and good cheer that made writing the first edition of this book downright enjoyable. I credit my running team, Runs in Her Stockings, for teaching me to go from 3 to 13 miles in one year flat. And where else can you, in between pages, sneak in a kayaking trip alongside Orca whales, porpoises, and Alaskan-sized salmon while spotting a black bear along the shore and eagles overhead? I have a special appreciation for neighbors Susan and John, who welcomed me to their community with open arms. I am grateful to the University of Florida for allowing me to have a sabbatical in one of the most spectacular places on earth.

The second edition was also written during a sabbatical, for which I am grateful—this time from the School of Community Health at Portland State University. Unfortunately my sabbatical location was a bit more mundane—my home office. Much of that edition was written between 1 P.M. and 3 P.M., known to mothers of young children as “nap time.” I am grateful to my momma-friends, who at first glance had nothing to do with this book, but actually helped me more than they know.

This third edition, which has been completely updated with the latest data, was written over the summer of 2009. Now that my daughters are school-age, the days of naps are long over (including mine!). Like all working mothers I struggled to sneak in precious moments of quiet reflection needed to write this book while still feeling like a “good mother” who was there for my children. I can relate to the dilemmas faced by the women introduced here—how does a woman do it all? Throw in the insecurity of low-wage work, and my respondent friends show that it is very tough indeed. I am most grateful to the Oregon Episcopal School community, where my daughters are now in the first and third grades, for providing the grounding (and time) to finish this project, in particular, friends Cordie and Ali.

Many colleagues around the country took time out of their precious schedules to review this manuscript and provide me with excellent ideas for my revision. Thank you Echo E. Fields, Southern Oregon University; Jane McCandless, University of West Georgia; Jackie Reynolds, Washington State University; Ruth Glasser, University of Connecticut; Deborah Plechner, University of Minnesota Duluth; and Phil Neisser, State University of New York at Potsdam. Patricia Quinlin for her support; and Ashley Dodge and Carly Czech who served as superb editors.

Finally, I want to express my deep and sincere gratitude to the many people in Florida and Oregon whose stories are told here. You generously opened your lives to scrutiny, and I hope that I have conveyed your messages with the warmth, empathy, and vigor they deserve. You are truly remarkable, and I thank you for your keen insights into the welfare system and the insecurity of low-tier work. As a token of my appreciation, a portion of the royalties from this book will be given to those programs, services, and charities that have helped you along the way. This book is dedicated to you.

CONTENTS

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xi

1 Introduction: Putting a Face on Welfare 1

Critical and Feminist Frameworks 6

Specific Contributions of This Study of Lived Experience 8

Welfare and Public Policy 10

Where Are the Voices of Welfare Recipients in the Discussion? 14

A National Profile of Welfare Recipients 15

Who Are the Participants in This Study? 20

Conclusion and Organization 23

Critical Thinking Questions 26

2 Historical and Persisting Dilemmas: How Do We Explain Poverty, What Should We Do about It? 27

History of Cash Assistance 28

Welfare Reform: "Ending Welfare As We Know It" 36

Explanations of Poverty and Welfare Use 39

Individualism 40

Social Structuralism 42

Culture of Poverty 44

Fatalism 45

Critical Thinking Questions 46

3 Stigma and Discrimination 47

Awareness of Societal Attitudes Toward Welfare Recipients 49

Racism and Welfare 51

Contexts Where Stigma and Discrimination Occur 55

Managing Stigma	58
Denial	58
Distancing Themselves from Other Welfare Recipients	59
Blaming External Forces: “It’s Not My Fault.”	65
Extolling the Importance of Motherhood	66
Critical Thinking Questions	69

4 Why Welfare? 71

The Influence of Social Structure	74
Employment	74
The Risk of Losing Health Insurance	76
Childcare	78
Fathers’ Involvement	81
Transportation	82
Racism and Sexism	84
The Welfare System Breeds “Dependence” on the System	85
Fatalism	86
Bad Luck	86
Poor Health	88
The Ending of Relationships	90
Violence	91
Why the Inconsistency Between Explanations of Their Own and Others’ Use of Welfare?	93
Critical Thinking Questions	96

5 Day-to-Day Living and Decision Making 97

Daily Activities: Wild Living or Depressing Routine?	101
Making Ends Meet with “The Check”	102
Living and Surviving on Food Stamps	106
Juggling Bills	108
Coping with the Stress	110
Affording Life’s “Luxuries”	112
Supplementing Welfare	115
Critical Thinking Questions	117

6	Living and Surviving Welfare: The Importance of Family, Friends, and Formal Support	118
	Informal Support: Help from Families, Friends and Neighbors, and Children's Fathers	123
	Assistance from Families	123
	Assistance from Friends and Neighbors	127
	Assistance from Children's Fathers	130
	Formal Support: Help from Charities and Social Services	134
	Working Side Jobs: Is This Fraud?	136
	Critical Thinking Questions	139
7	Insiders' Perspectives on the Welfare System	140
	Florida WAGES: A Case Example	143
	The Role of Government	145
	Opinions of the Welfare System	147
	Strengths of the Welfare System	148
	Weaknesses of the Welfare System	150
	Welfare Reforms	152
	Time Limits	152
	Work Requirements	155
	Family Caps	158
	Ideas for Reform	159
	Improving the Welfare System	159
	Improving the Structure of Low-Tier Work	161
	Critical Thinking Questions	163
8	Getting Off Welfare	164
	The Women in the Middle: Increasing Human Capital Is Only One Answer	169
	Education and Employment Training	170
	Work Experience	172
	The Importance of Our Social Structure	174
	Not Enough Jobs	175
	Types of Jobs Available for Women on Welfare	176

	The Value of Health Insurance	179
	Why Some Women on Welfare Are Hesitant to Take Jobs	181
	Critical Thinking Questions	185
9	Conclusion: Lessons Learned and Visions of Change	186
	The Gendered Nature of Welfare and Welfare Reform	187
	Has Welfare Reform Been a Success or a Failure?	192
	The Reasons for Its Failure	193
	Insights from Other Countries	195
	Critical Thinking Questions	200
	Appendix: Websites of Interest	201
	References	206
	Index	217

CHAPTER

1

Introduction: Putting a Face on Welfare

Located on a dead-end street, the house was difficult to find. Luckily, I left in plenty of time and found the house with five minutes to spare. It was a very modest home, but well cared for, as though the resident took tremendous pride in it. Someone living there was obviously a gardener; there were many potted flowers and plants on the porch and walkway. I thought of my mother, an avid gardener. As my thoughts drifted, I surveyed the neighborhood of junked cars, broken children's toys, dilapidated houses, and scrawny dogs roaming loose. A sudden chill brought me back to the task at hand. I was prepared and anxious to hear the muffled voices of women straining to be heard.

The front door was wide open, and Sheila was waiting for me to arrive. She warmly, but nervously, invited me into her home. She was a short woman, white, and looked older than her 40 years, with her graying hair pulled back. Her eyes were friendly, but reserved. We sat in her small living room, which contained a worn couch, a rocking chair with its cushion covered by a towel, a small television set, and an old-fashioned record player with many LPs and a large stack of "45s" sitting on a rack next to it. Hanging on the walls were over a dozen photos and paint-on-velvet pictures of Elvis Presley. I later learned that her primary hobby was collecting Elvis mementos, and most of the records were his early recordings. I had a wave of nostalgia.

Two preschool children were resting on the couch and slept through most of the interview. Sheila told me that they were her grandchildren, two of the "lights of her life," and the children of her 25-year-old married daughter. She was babysitting the children today. Sheila also had a daughter Melanie, whom she spoke of with love, pride, and fierce protectiveness. In 1995, when Melanie was 12, Sheila received \$241 a month in a cash welfare grant and \$212 in food stamps from the state of Florida for Melanie's care. In 2010, Sheila would receive the same \$241 in cash, if she qualified at all. Despite inflation, benefits have not risen in Florida during the past 14 years. She would receive up to \$323 in food stamps, an increase of \$111 (Schott & Levinson, November 24, 2008).

Sheila described her daily routine: She gets up at 5:00 A.M. every morning to start her housework before she gets her daughter up for school. She spoke of going to night school two evenings a week to work toward her general educational development, GED. Other than cleaning her house, taking care of Melanie, visiting her grown

daughter Jamie and Jamie's husband, occasionally babysitting her grandchildren, and attending night school, Sheila is a loner. "When you got a bunch of people together, you got problems," she tells me. She has few friends, rarely socializes, and considers her daughters, son-in-law, and grandchildren her only real family, despite a husband from whom she has been separated for 14 years and a large extended family, all of whom live 200 miles away. Two hundred miles might as well be a world away. She fled abuse and an intolerable family situation. She is on her own now, and her world revolves around taking care of her youngest daughter. Melanie's father has never contributed financially to Melanie's support, nor has he been involved emotionally in her life.

He's never offered to even take care of Melanie at all. Even when we lived in the same town, he didn't have that much to do with her, except, say, when it was for his benefit. She's 12 now, and we went to court. He ain't paid a dime, he ain't trying to pay a dime, and they ain't doing nothing to him. Putting it straight, I just haven't had good luck with men. Let's put it that way. Everybody makes mistakes <laughter>, but I ain't making mine over no more. I'm tired of doing the same old thing. And I don't associate with my family. The only family I have are my daughters and my two grandbabies. That's it. When I need help, I go to her <oldest daughter>. Her and her husband. Other than that, if they can't help me, then I just do without. Because they are the only ones I'll ask anything from.

When Melanie comes home from school in the afternoon, they rarely go out again, except for Sheila's night class. Both are shy, have few friends, and do not like to socialize. Sheila told me that Melanie is self-conscious about being poor, and never invites anyone from school to come into their home. Instead, in the afternoon, Melanie tends to her homework with Sheila's supervision, completes her chores, and they watch television together. Sheila crochets or listens to her Elvis records to pass the time when she's not busy cleaning house or cooking supper. They live a quiet and very private life.

People make comments at her school, you know. That's why she, Melanie now, that's why she's a loner too. When she comes in that door, she don't go back outside. This afternoon she's going off for the weekend with her older sister. That's about as far as she goes . . . people say, well, you can get up, you can do better for yourself, you can get a job, and this and that. They ain't never been in a situation like I've been. I mean, when you get in between a rock and a hard place, and you got a child to care of, you do what you got to do. But what goes around comes around. So, one of these days, with all their smart comments, they might find themselves in a worser predicament than some of us have been in.

There is always a stressful undercurrent, according to Sheila. Will they have enough money to live on this month? Despite the best of planning, something "out of the ordinary" always occurs and taxes their budget. Can they afford Melanie's school field trip? She has outgrown her shoes, and can they afford a new pair? Winter is approaching, and they both need coats. Sheila feels this stress always gnawing at her, and believes it is responsible for her poor health. Some days, she doesn't "even feel

like getting out of bed.” The stress is affecting her physical health, and she has seen several doctors to find out what is ailing her, to no avail.

Sheila dreams of getting a good job someday. She bubbled with enthusiasm as she told me of a job at the post office, which she applied for, that paid over \$8.00 an hour. But then again, she might have to take a test for it, and this concerned her. Sheila’s reading, writing, and math skills are low, typical for someone who has not completed high school. She worries that she will not qualify for a job like this. But she is not afraid of hard work; she’s spent most of her life working as a maid in hotels or cleaning private houses. Despite long hours, these jobs never pulled her out of poverty. She was born poor and has been poor all her life, living alongside the other 37 million poor Americans, or 13 percent of the population in 2007 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor & Smith, 2008). Living on just a few hundred dollars a month is hard, but at least the income is secure, Sheila told me. She fears the insecurity of low-tier jobs. The take-home pay may be more than welfare, but they don’t provide health insurance. She’s concerned that her food stamps will be eliminated. And there is always the dread of being laid off. If she lost her job, it would take another month or two to get back on welfare, she told me, and it would be difficult to support her daughter in the meantime.

Sheila is feeling the pressure of the changes in the welfare system:

I’m supposed to have a job by January 1. That’s what all this schooling is supposed to be for. Plus I got applications out on my own. I got one at the post office, and I got one out at the mail room out on 441, Pic and Save <discount store>, Winn Dixie <grocery store>, Alachua General <hospital>. I’d like to work in a hospital, you know, like in the housekeeping department. Cleaning, that’s more my line because I know what I’m doing. I don’t need someone to tell me how to clean. I’ve been cleaning since I was 7 years old. If I ain’t learned it by now, then I’ll never learn. But it’s hard to get a job. There aren’t that many jobs out there for people who ain’t finished school. Now they want a GED, or they want this, they want that. I’ve been going to this Career Connections thing to help me find a job, but going from nine to three, plus night school, when do I have time to do my own cooking and cleaning? Why do they want to make us old women do the things that they should be making those 15, 16-year-old girls do? Now, if I were 15 or 16 years old, I wouldn’t have one complaint about this Career Connections, this and that. But I’m 40 years old. I mean, give me a break! But as far as the GED part, yes, I want to do that even if they stopped my welfare tomorrow. I’m getting my GED! I’m determined. I’ll be there ten years probably before I get that GED, but I’m going to get it, and it’s going to hang right there on that wall.

Sheila was the first woman I interviewed, and the first to pose these questions and concerns to me. But she was not the last. These were common concerns that ran through each and every woman’s story.

Patrice, a 25-year-old black woman, is also a “typical” welfare recipient, if there is such a thing. But unlike Sheila, she has finished high school, and was taking classes toward becoming a Licensed Practical Nurse, until her unplanned pregnancy and its complications, which required complete bed rest, forced her to quit. Nonetheless, she now works for a local hospital providing personal care in private homes, such as assisting

bedridden patients with cooking, personal grooming, and housecleaning. She works part-time, and her income is low. She therefore continues to receive a partial welfare benefit for her two preschool-aged children. Patrice is proud of her education and work experience:

I went to traveler's school, so I have experience in the traveling field, and I took business management for a short while. I was a teacher's aid for a year and a half, so, you know, I have experience here and there. I can type. I can do a variety of things. But I prefer working with people, like in nursing, over all the rest.

Patrice reveals the complexities and ironies in life. Events do not always go according to plan. Even the best of intentions and relationships with men that were thought to be solid sometimes fall through. She shares her perceptions of women's experiences with men, their children, and the welfare system, and notes how they cope with seemingly discouraging situations.

PATRICE: Well, if you sit around moping about your condition, that's not going to better the situation. All you're going to do is become depressed, and then you become more vulnerable to different things, and people will take advantage of you. So you have to keep your head on right and think positive.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that happens to a lot of women?

PATRICE: I really do. Well, it's like this. Being a young lady, I think a lot of women date a guy for years. And then you get pregnant. You expect him not really to marry you, but to be there for you and the child, but they jump up and leave. I believe women get depressed because of the fact that you got to just totally give up your life. Like me, I was in nursing school, and I was doing great. I became pregnant, so I got depressed because the guy left me after all those years. I had to resign in my eighth month of pregnancy. But I was working then too, because I was trying to maintain my rent and my car, you know. I think a lot of women become discouraged and depressed because what you are expecting in life—all your dreams and fantasies become nightmares. The guy leaves you, and then you know you got to turn to welfare, which everybody thinks is bad because, you know, it's taxpayer money. People will be criticizing you. Then you have to stand in these long lines to get stamps. Then you have to be criticized on a daily basis. And it's just discouraging. Then you have to go for your appointments, sometimes, there for two or three hours before your worker calls you. They just blabber your business out real loud in the lobby <laughter>. You got to be embarrassed. You look around, you know? Then you have to go into the health department, and you look around, and everybody looks pitiful. You don't have the proper clothes to dress, you know, maternity wear. You be depressed. Then you be vulnerable to the situation. The first guy—well maybe not the first—but a guy promises you the world, and you are weak to the situation. You don't think your own situation is going to ever get any better, and then you end up in the same situation all over again if you don't be smart. But after two mistakes—I won't say mistakes

because I love my children—but after two downfalls, you know, with men, I've learned <laughter>.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think this happens to a lot of women who are single moms?

PATRICE: Yes, I know, as a matter of fact, because a lot of my friends, we sit and talk when we aren't too depressed. We sit down and talk about it, and we've pretty much shared the same experience. You get pregnant for a guy you thought you knew; somebody you dated for years. Then he jumps up and leaves you and ends up marrying somebody they don't know for nothing but a couple of months. And you be depressed and have all the children and all the aggravation. You know, when the kids get sick, regardless of what you want to do, you got to stay up with them. And then the next morning when you're working, you've got to get up and report to work. Your employers don't want to hear that your child was sick and you kind of need to be flexible. And if you're at school, you've got to take days off when your child is sick. You got to be running from doctor's appointments, you know? Then you worry about the welfare office on your back. So, if you get depressed, you can't let your depression explode. You got to keep it under control because you got these children.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think the guys leave at that point?

PATRICE: Well, I feel that a lot of men are scared of commitments and responsibilities. A child is a lot of responsibility. But the guys, they were older than I am by almost ten years, so I thought they would know their roles. But no. They probably felt that their life would have to stop. They couldn't do the things they wanted to do. But, as a mom, I had to give up everything, you know, stay home and take care of the children. I had to give up school, everything. But it's their responsibility too, their role. Not only are they hurting you, they are hurting the children because there are so many underprivileged kids getting into different things, drugs, and gangs and stuff because they don't have a positive male role model. They just have mom, and being a single parent I can't stay home and be with them 24 hours, seven days a week. I have to work to support me and them because they're my family. I think it's wrong because it puts me as a mom, me and other single moms, on the line because we have to give up our lives. You can't date freely because you've got children around. You don't know who is sick, you know, like a child molester. You really got to know the guy. And then you got to make sure they are going to take to your children, and how your children like them. But I'm going to do the best I can. I'm going to provide for them, you know. I'm going to think positive and I pray and ask the Lord to assist me with, you know, raising children alone.

This is a book about welfare. It contains the intimate stories of women living in Florida and in Oregon who received cash welfare, a program now called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). This program provides cash payments to poor