

September 8, 2003

The 12 Percent Problem

One of the saddest statistics in the still eerily jobless recovery is that 1.3 million more Americans fell into poverty last year — almost half of them children. Whatever else is on the national agenda, there should be no higher priority than directing already available help to these least among us. But the growth in the poverty roll to almost 35 million — more than 12 percent of the population — has been accompanied by an equally disturbing drop in those impoverished families who are eligible for limited welfare actually managing to obtain the aid.

After the end of the old welfare system was legislated, time-limited help for the needy was enacted, with more than three in four eligible families benefiting in 1996. But by 2000, only half the eligible families were receiving this aid, for reasons not fully plumbed as government officials continue to simplistically trumpet the drop in the welfare caseload. Clearly, more poor people are hurting more, particularly in the vanishing of employment opportunities that were promised and prodded as part of the new, temporary aid program.

As more families sink below the poverty line, joblessness among single, undereducated mothers is up to 18 percent; and families whose temporary welfare help ends are increasingly unlikely to find jobs in the current resistant economy, according to recent data analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington think tank. Years ago, the nation chose to proclaim a "war" on poverty. Priorities shifted as progress was measured. The poor are still out there at the edge of the scope, the last in line for recovery.