

HEALTH RISK FACTORS OF WELFARE RECIPIENTS MOVING TO WORK

Muriel Rice PhD, APRN, BC*, Judy Martin PhD, APRN, BC, & Mona Wicks PhD, RN*

*University of Tennessee, College of Nursing, 877 Madison Ave. Memphis, TN 38163
814 Jefferson Avenue Memphis, TN, 38105

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Purpose: Federal welfare reform enacted in 1996 created the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program as the welfare to work initiative for 2 million poor families. Most TANF recipients are single women with children; 39% are Black. While this program was designed to foster self-sufficiency and reduce the economic burden associated with supporting poor families, data indicate that welfare recipients are five times more likely not to seek employment and have a 57% increased likelihood of job loss due to health problems. Thus, the purpose of this study was to describe relevant health risk factors of women transitioning from welfare to work.

Methods: An exploratory descriptive design was used to acquire study data for women (n=89) enrolled in a university-based TANF job-training program. Health risk behaviors, psycho-emotional health (level of depression, self-esteem, perceived social support), and quality of life data were collected using self-report questionnaires.

Findings: Eighty percent of study participants were between 17 and 35 years of age (Mean = 29.9±8.0 years), 97% were females, 93% were African-American, 54% were high school graduates, and 32% had some college education. Participants had health risk factors that included: obesity (70%), cigarette smoking (30%), exercised less than three times a week (62%), and consumption of high fat diets (89%). Fifty percent of the females who were 40 years of age or older (n=10), were not receiving mammograms at the recommended screening intervals, 24% had not received an annual clinical breast exam, and 60% were not performing monthly self-breast exams. Psycho-emotional health assessment findings suggested that 48% of the subjects perceived their health as fair to poor, 33% had depressive symptoms, and 63% reported dissatisfaction with their lives

Discussion: Long-term retention in the workforce and economic independence is closely linked to the health of TANF recipients. Aggressive efforts are needed to ensure that their move from welfare into the workforce does not further diminish the well being of this population. Identification of health risk factors that threaten the health status of welfare recipients is vital to the development of tailored, effective risk-reduction interventions.