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The JOBS Evaluation: Monthly Participation Rates in Three Sites and Factors Affecting Participation Levels in Welfare-to-Work Programs

Gayle Hamilton

In 1988, the Family Support Act (FSA) sought to define a new social contract between government and welfare recipients. It decreed that parents both fathers and mothers should be the primary supporters of children; that welfare agencies should provide services and incentives to assist families in making the transition from welfare to self-support; and that welfare recipients who do not take steps toward independence from welfare should face meaningful consequences, such as a reduction in their welfare grants.

The primary vehicle for assisting welfare recipients to become self-sufficient under FSA is the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program. JOBS provides an array of job search, work experience, education, and training services to families who receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Endorsing a view of welfare as involving an obligation on the part of its recipients, the legislation mandates (i.e., requires) participation in JOBS activities by all AFDC single-parent recipients with children age 3 and over (or, at state option, age 1 and over) to the extent that resources permit. Exemptions may be granted to recipients if they have a long-term illness or incapacitation, or are taking care of a household member who is ill or incapacitated; are of advanced age; are under age 16; are pregnant and past the first trimester; or are living in an area where the program services are unavailable. Welfare recipients for whom participation in JOBS is mandatory, but who fail to participate without “good cause” or who reject a bona fide offer of employment can be “sanctioned,” that is, their portion of the welfare grant can be removed from their family’s total grant.

Participation Standards and Why They Matter

The JOBS legislation broke new ground by setting forth explicit and gradually increasing participation standards that states must meet in order to receive the full federal match for any state JOBS funds.¹ Welfare reform bills under debate when this report was written in July 1995 the Personal Responsibility Act of 1995, the Family Self-Sufficiency Act of 1995, the Family Support Act of 1995, and the proposed Work First Plan also included participation standards.

Advocates of federal participation standards see them as a vehicle for achieving several purposes designed to make the mandate real. First, standards provide a way for the federal government to motivate states to strive to achieve similar goals. Second, participation standards are a means of communicating to both welfare program administrators and recipients that welfare receipt represents a quid pro quo: that it is conditioned on recipients’ involvement in

¹ In the JOBS regulations, participation standards are applied to those who are required to participate in JOBS in a month and do not have a good cause reason for not participating.

employment-promoting activities, or in work itself. Third, such standards are seen as a way of fostering the movement of people off welfare.

The development of actual participation standards for welfare-to-work programs, however, often entails compromises among numerous interested parties, and agreed-upon standards may be complex. There are several reasons for this. First, the higher the participation standard, the more money is generally needed to pay for program activities, child care, and program staff so that they can quickly assign individuals to work-promoting activities, closely monitor their participation and progress, and enforce penalties for non-compliance with program requirements in a timely manner. Second, it is difficult to develop standards when, as is the case with welfare-to-work programs, there is not widespread agreement on the goals of the programs or on the program practices most likely to achieve those goals. Third, standards “drive” the performance of a system. How one defines participation, the group of individuals to whom the participation standards apply, and the penalties for not meeting the standard will all result in welfare department staff behaving in different ways and emphasizing different procedures or outcomes. As a result, policymakers often include numerous complicated safeguards in the standards, seeking to avoid unintended consequences or program practices that are at cross purposes with one another. Finally, the development of welfare-to-work program participation standards is difficult because of the push for demanding standards against the pull of what is affordable and attainable. It is challenging to create standards that are viewed as both tough enough but not so tough that states cannot meet them and the standards come to be seen as only a pro forma requirement. Such unmet expectations carry with them the risk that the public will become even more disenchanted with government’s ability to change the character or conditions of welfare.

The Nature of This Report

This report is one in a series produced as part of a seven-site, national JOBS Evaluation sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED), and conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC). The report analyzes data from three of the evaluation sites and addresses several issues related to participation standards.

- How do participation rates for these three sites, which operated well-managed, mandatory, and relatively “tough” JOBS programs, compare to those measured in past studies of welfare-to-work programs?
- What proportion of the AFDC recipients currently required to participate in JOBS are actually involved in a JOBS activity during a typical month? What proportion of all AFDC single-parent cases do these participants represent?
- Why are participation rates not higher?
- What changes would be needed in order to raise participation rates?
- Finally, since participation standards are again a topic of public debate, what do the report’s findings suggest for the participation standards being developed in the current welfare reform bills?

Using data collected from the case files of 1,113 AFDC recipients in three of the JOBS Evaluation sites, the report presents various monthly participation measures, documents reasons

for non-participation among those who were not in JOBS activities in typical months, and discusses the challenges of setting welfare-to-work program participation standards that reflect various desired outcomes, are achievable, and are equally challenging in different states. The report focuses on participation in two “typical” months during the evaluation: October and November 1992.²

The three sites examined in the report Atlanta, Georgia (Fulton County), Grand Rapids, Michigan (Kent County), and Riverside, California (Riverside County) are particularly useful localities in which to examine what may well be the upper limits of JOBS participation under current funding. These sites all had substantial experience operating welfare-to-work programs prior to JOBS, and have sought to run JOBS programs serving all AFDC recipients required to participate under current law. In addition, unlike many localities, these sites run mandatory programs, meaning that they require participation by all JOBS-mandatory individuals, demand participation in work-promoting activities for as long as individuals are receiving AFDC, and do not hesitate to use formal mechanisms, i.e., AFDC grant sanctions, to enforce the continuous participation requirement. (During the period under study, two of the three sites were known as running JOBS programs that were among the toughest in their respective states.)

Furthermore, early random assignment-based findings show that the three sites appear to have produced large reductions in the numbers of individuals receiving AFDC and to have resulted in more people becoming employed during a two-year follow-up period.³ Finally, the sites represent a range of conditions in terms of caseload size and demographics as well as AFDC grant levels, local labor markets, staff/recipient ratios, recipient enrollment practices, JOBS program philosophies, and costs under which to study how and why participation rates vary.

Highlights of the Findings

This report points to eight major findings.

1. ***A participation rate is a ratio and, as such, is highly sensitive to who is counted in the numerator and who is included in the denominator.*** Decisions on both will affect the feasibility and cost of achieving a particular participation rate.
2. ***The participation rates for the three sites are at the high end of and, for two of the sites, higher than those found in past welfare-to-work programs.*** In two of the sites studied, monthly participation rates exceed those achieved in the San Diego Saturation Work Initiative Model (SWIM) study, a demonstration specially funded to determine the maximum level of monthly participation feasible in welfare-to-work programs of the 1980s. Measured over two years, participation rates in the three sites are at the high end of the range reported in MDRC’s studies of other mandatory welfare-to-work initiatives in the 1980s and early 1990s.

² Participation data were collected through reviews of the JOBS case files of individuals who were JOBS-mandatory and had already attended a JOBS orientation. Unpublished state- and county-reported statistics were used, however, to estimate the proportion of single-parent AFDC cases in which there was a JOBS-mandatory individual during the two months under study, and the proportion of JOBS-mandatory individuals in those months who had attended a JOBS orientation by those months. As a result, participation rates presented for JOBS-mandatory orientation attenders have a higher degree of precision than those presented for all JOBS-mandatory individuals or for all single-parent AFDC cases.

³ See Stephen Freedman and Daniel Friedlander, *Executive Summary of The JOBS Evaluation: Early Findings on Program Impacts in Three Sites* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, July 1995).

3. ***In each week in a typical month (in 1992), up to 14 percent (depending on the site) of those mandated to participate in JOBS were either active in JOBS for at least 20 hours or working at least 15 hours.*** This monthly participation level based on a measure that shares some (but not all) of the features of the JOBS measure is roughly comparable to the goal specified in the JOBS regulations for 1992. (These required that, on average, 11 percent of the JOBS-mandatory AFDC recipients who did not have good cause reasons for not participating were supposed to be JOBS participants in each month in that year.)

Even though they are not all currently required to participate (and are thus not all in the JOBS program), it is informative to ascertain what percentage of all single-parent AFDC case heads in each week in a typical month participated in a JOBS activity for at least 20 hours or were employed for at least 15 hours. That proportion is 5 to 10 percent, depending on the site.

4. ***Using another, more inclusive measure, up to 44 percent of JOBS-mandatory individuals participated in a typical month.*** Many JOBS-mandatory individuals did not meet the above standard, but were being sanctioned for non-participation or were participating for less than 20 hours in at least one week of the month. Expanding the numerator of the rate to include people who were being sanctioned or who participated or were employed (for any number of hours) in every week raises the monthly participation rate to between 20 and 26 percent of the JOBS-mandatory individuals in any site (which translates to between 9 and 21 percent of all AFDC cases). Expanding the numerator even further, to include those who participated, were employed, or were sanctioned at any point in the month (not in every week in the month), monthly participation rates reach as high as 44 percent.
5. ***Increasing participation rates substantially will require more money, but some reasons for non-participation are not funding-related.*** Increasing participation requires sufficient staff (i.e., funding) to quickly provide JOBS orientations to all JOBS-mandatory AFDC recipients and assign them to JOBS activities, to closely monitor every individual's participation and progress, and to react to individuals' non-compliance with program requirements in a timely manner; ample resources to operate or fund job clubs and other activities; and funding for support services such as child care. In addition, some non-participation could be alleviated through the use of more efficient automated tracking systems or case management procedures. Some reasons for non-participation, however, are unlikely to be alleviated with more funding: In any given month, many AFDC recipients are not active in JOBS because they or family members are ill, or they are in a brief waiting period before scheduled activities outside the welfare department (and not funded by JOBS) begin.
6. ***Monthly rates underestimate participation and employment because these statuses, as well as spells on welfare, are dynamic processes.*** Every month, people start and end job search, work experience, education, and training activities, as well as employment. In addition, people join and leave the AFDC rolls every month. As a result, many individuals participate in JOBS activities at some point, even if they are not participating in a given month.
7. ***A uniform national participation standard can impose a very varied burden on different states.*** The difficulty of establishing a "level playing field" derives from differences in many conditions across states, including state AFDC grant levels, caseload demographics, and economic conditions. For example, if employment while receiving

AFDC is not counted as “participation,” high-grant states, or states with generous income “disregards,”⁴ will (other things being equal) have lower participation rates. This is because many AFDC recipients in these states will still qualify for AFDC while simultaneously working and receiving welfare, and will have more of an economic incentive to work. If employment is not counted in the standard, these states will be at a disadvantage.

8. ***If activity in the three sites stayed at the levels measured for 1992, these sites would fall far short of the ultimate participation standards contained in current welfare reform bills.*** The report roughly assesses how well, in terms of participation rates, these three sites would fare under the welfare reform bills mentioned earlier. If exemption criteria under some of the current bills are applied to the AFDC caseloads of the three sites in this report, and it is assumed that participation levels remain the same, approximately 16 percent of the newly defined mandatory AFDC case heads in these three sites could be expected to be “covered” by participation in program activities, employment, or sanctioning in a typical month. (This calculation assumes that funding levels, welfare regulations, and the behavior of welfare recipients in the future will result in the same numbers of individuals participating at least 20 hours per week, being employed, or being sanctioned in each week in a month as was found during the months studied for this report.)

Since the current welfare reform bills all specify monthly participation rates that start lower but steadily increase to 50 percent by the year 2003, this estimate suggests that the sites examined for this report all of which had substantial experience and ran strict, mandatory, and successful JOBS programs would need to experience dramatic changes in program rules and practices, welfare recipients’ behavior, or funding in order to reach the ultimate standards contained in those bills.

Explanation and Detail of the Findings

- **The activities counted as “participation” and the people included in participation measures can greatly affect the measured rate and, as a result, influence the feasibility and cost of achieving a particular standard.**

Participation rates are made up of a numerator, consisting of individuals doing activities that “count” as participation, and a denominator, representing individuals to whom the rates apply. By varying each or both of these terms, participation measures can be defined in many ways. To take a hypothetical example: Suppose a county has an AFDC caseload of 2,000 single parents, 1,000 of whom are required to participate in a particular program. Suppose further that, of those required to participate, 400 participate at all in a month (even as little as an hour), and 100 of them participate for at least 80 hours in the month. Given these data, what is the monthly participation rate? Anywhere from 100/2000, or 5 percent, to 400/1000, or 40 percent, depending on who is “counted” in the numerator (the top part of the fraction) and the denominator (the bottom part of the fraction).

Table 1 shows five possible ways of defining the numerators of participation rates (“A” through “E”). They vary in two ways: by expanding the range of activities counted as participation and by changing the level and consistency of involvement in JOBS activities,

⁴ In such states, more of an AFDC recipient’s income is “disregarded” when the AFDC grant is calculated than in states with a smaller disregard.

Table 1
The JOBS Evaluation
Monthly Participation Rates In Atlanta, Grand Rapids, And Riverside,
Using Alternative Participation Measures And Denominators

Measure Label	Statuses Counted in Numerator of Participation Rate	Level of Involvement Required in order to be Counted as a Participant	Participation Rate for Different Denominators		
			Based on the number of Single-Parent AFDC Cases in the month (a)	Based on the number of JOBS-mandatory individuals in the month	Based on the number of individuals who had attended JOBS orientation
A	Participation in JOBS activities or employment while receiving AFDC	Participated at least 20 hours per week in every week or employed at least 15 hours per week in every week	5-10%	4-14%	7-20%
B	Participation in JOBS activities or employment while receiving AFDC	Participated at all in every week or employed at all in every week.	8-18%	15-18%	22-29%
C	Participation in JOBS activities or employment while receiving AFDC or sanction imposed or requested	Participated at all in every week or employed at all in every week or sanction imposed or requested in every week.	9-21%	20-26%	30-46%
D	Participation in JOBS activities or employment while receiving AFDC or sanction imposed or requested	Participated at all in month or employed at all in month or sanction imposed or requested at all in month	12-30%	35-44%	54-70%
E	Participation in JOBS activities	Participated at all in month	8-20%	16-28%	23-42%

NOTES: Individuals for whom data are missing on scheduled and actual hours of attendance for all weeks in the month are not counted as participants in this table. For this reason, participation rates for Measure "D" may be slightly lower in this table compared to those implied by other tables or figures.

employment, or sanctioning that an AFDC recipient must display to be “counted” as a participant. As shown in Table 1, the numerator definitions expand “participation” beyond participation in JOBS activities to also include being employed while receiving AFDC or being sanctioned. The rationale for including the latter two circumstances is that AFDC recipients in these statuses, though not participating in a JOBS activity, are fulfilling their JOBS obligation by being employed or are being penalized for not complying with the program’s rules. In addition, the numerator definitions range from counting as participants only those who are active in JOBS or are employed for a specific number of hours in every week in a month, to counting as participants those who are participating or employed at all, or are sanctioned, at any point in a month.

Table 1 also illustrates three possible ways (columns 4 through 6) of defining the denominators of participation rates, i.e., applying the rates to different groups of AFDC recipients. Column 4 shows monthly participation rates *for the total single-parent AFDC caseload*, using the different participation rate numerator definitions (“A” through “E”) defined in Table 1. Column 5 indicates the resulting participation rates when various participation measures are applied only to those AFDC “case heads” who are required to participate in JOBS, i.e., *those who are JOBS-mandatory*, in the months under study. Column 6 indicates rates for AFDC recipients who are not only JOBS-mandatory, but *who had already attended a JOBS orientation*, the precursor to assignment to and participation in a JOBS activity.⁵

⁵ Note that none of the participation rate definitions in the report precisely match the one embodied in the JOBS regulations. In the JOBS monthly participation rate, all individuals who could possibly be counted as participants (i.e., could be included in the numerator of the rate) must be scheduled for JOBS activities for an average of 20 hours per week across the group. To actually be considered a “participant,” these individuals must attend at least 75 percent of their scheduled hours. In addition, the numerator includes individuals in their initial months of employment and individuals who are not JOBS-mandatory but volunteer for the program. The denominator of the JOBS monthly participation rate includes all JOBS-

The participation rates in Table 1 show that relaxing the definition of “participants,” i.e., changing the participation rate numerator from definition “A” to definition “D,” raises the participation rates. In addition, applying the measures to increasingly smaller proportions of the single-parent AFDC caseloads in the three JOBS evaluation sites, i.e., changing the definition of the denominator from that shown in column 4 to that shown in column 6, also raises the rates. Using the most stringent and lenient of these numerator and denominator definitions results in participation rates ranging from 4 to 70 percent in a month.

- **In the three sites, all of which operated tough, mandatory JOBS programs, the proportion of all single-parent AFDC case heads in a month who typically participated in a JOBS activity for at least 20 hours per week or were employed for at least 15 hours per week, during every week in the month, is small, ranging from 5 to 10 percent.**

Even though they are not all currently required to participate (and thus are not all in the JOBS program), it is informative to ascertain what percentage of all single-parent AFDC case heads in a typical month participated in a JOBS activity for at least 20 hours each week or were employed for at least 15 hours each week. As indicated in Table 1 (column 4, row 1), the proportion is between 5 and 10 percent, depending on the site.

Measure “B” in Table 1 represents a less stringent definition, achieved by relaxing the required intensity of participation and counting as participants those who were active in a JOBS activity at all in a week (not for a specified number of hours in the week), or were employed while receiving AFDC, during every week in a month. Using this definition, a slightly higher proportion of the single-parent AFDC case heads in a month between 8 and 15 percent, depending on the site were typically “participating.”

- **The rates are significantly higher if one counts sanctioning, in addition to participation in a JOBS activity or employment, as meaning that the individual was being “covered” by the JOBS mandate. Depending on the site, between 9 and 21 percent of the single-parent AFDC case heads were either participating in JOBS, employed, or sanctioned in every week in a typical month.**

In any given month, many individuals in certain sites may be in the process of being sanctioned for not cooperating with JOBS’ requirements and are thus, in some sense, affected by the JOBS obligation even though they are neither participating in JOBS nor employed. These people are being treated appropriately by JOBS staff and, depending on the site and whether or not they have been previously sanctioned, are not required to participate in JOBS activities. Measure “C,” shown in the third row of Table 1, takes this into account. This measure counts sanctioning activity, as well as JOBS participation (for any number of hours) and employment. As shown in the fourth column, between 9 and 21 percent of the single-parent AFDC case heads in a month were either participating, employed, or in the process of being sanctioned in each week during a typical month.

mandatory individuals except those who have a “good cause” reason for not participating. In contrast to the JOBS monthly participation rate, the participation rate numerators shown in Table 1 set an individual-level, absolute standard for the number of “active” hours per week one must have to be counted as a participant, treat employed individuals as participants as long as they remain employed, and do not take into account the behavior of JOBS volunteers. In addition, the denominators in Table 1 do not exclude individuals who have good cause reasons for non-participation.

If the definition of “participation” or “coverage” is expanded even further, to include the percentage of individuals who participate at all, are employed at all, or are in the process of becoming sanctioned at some point during a month (but are not necessarily in one of these statuses every week during the month), between 12 and 30 percent of the single-parent AFDC case heads could be considered to be covered by some type of JOBS obligation. (See measure “D” in the fourth row, column 4 of Table 1.)

- **If JOBS-mandatory individuals are used as the denominator, instead of all AFDC single parents, the monthly participation rate increases.**

The participation rates reported so far all used the entire single-parent AFDC caseload as their denominator, even though this includes people who were not required to participate. Only a portion of AFDC cases, however, include an adult who is required to participate in JOBS (i.e., they are JOBS-mandatory): an estimated 23 percent in Atlanta, 74 percent in Grand Rapids, and 25 percent in Riverside in a typical month. Many individuals are JOBS-exempt because they have a very young child: one younger than age 3 in Atlanta and Riverside, and younger than age 1 in Grand Rapids. In addition, data from the sites indicate that between 9 and 26 percent of AFDC cases are exempt from JOBS because the case includes only children (under 16 years of age). Other frequent reasons for JOBS exemptions include incapacitation and the fact that the case head is a 16- to 18-year-old in school full-time.

As shown in the first row, column 5 of Table 1, the proportion of JOBS-mandatory individuals in a month who participated in a JOBS activity for at least 20 hours per week or were employed for at least 15 hours per week during every week in the month ranges from 4 to 14 percent.⁶ If sanctioning is included in the measure, and people who participated or were employed for any number of hours in every week are counted, 20 to 26 percent of the JOBS-mandatory individuals are in JOBS activities, employed, or sanctioned in each week in a typical month (measure “C” in Table 1. If the numerator is expanded even further, to include those who participated, were employed, or were sanctioned at any point in the month (not in every week in the month), monthly participation rates range from 35 to 44 percent.

- **Participation rates for the three JOBS Evaluation sites are at the high end of and, for two of the sites, higher than rates measured in past studies of welfare-to-work programs.**

In two of the three studied sites, monthly participation rates exceed those achieved in the San Diego Saturation Work Initiative Model (SWIM) study, a demonstration specially funded to determine the maximum level of monthly participation feasible in welfare-to-work programs of the 1980s. Among those who had attended SWIM orientations, between 31 and 35 percent of the individuals required to participate in SWIM in any given month were active (at all) in job club,

⁶ In some sites, the proportion of JOBS-mandatory individuals participating in a month is lower than the comparable proportion of all single-parent AFDC cases. This is because some single-parent case heads are working 30 hours or more per week for at least the minimum wage while receiving AFDC. These individuals are exempted from JOBS owing to their employment, but can be counted as meeting a welfare-to-work obligation when participation standards are applied to all AFDC case heads and not just to those who are JOBS-mandatory. According to detailed data available for Columbus, Ohio (another JOBS Evaluation site), about 4 percent of all single-parent case heads are in this situation. In column 4 of Table 1, this Columbus estimate has been applied to the three sites examined for this report to derive their participation rates. Note that this proportion could be higher in states that have instituted more generous income disregards for welfare recipients who are employed.

work experience, education, or training activities in the month.⁷ In Atlanta and Grand Rapids, 42 percent of all JOBS-mandatory individuals who had attended JOBS orientations participated in a JOBS activity (at all, not for a certain number of hours in every week) in a typical month; in Riverside, largely because many individuals were working part-time while on welfare, this percentage was 23 percent. (See the last row of column 6 of Table 1.)

Measured over two years (and not as of a particular month), participation rates in the three JOBS Evaluation sites are at the high end of the range reported in MDRC's studies of other mandatory welfare-to-work initiatives in the 1980s and early 1990s. Depending on the site (and not shown in Table 1), between 50 and 67 percent of the orientation attenders in each JOBS Evaluation site participated at all in at least one of the following activities during the 24 months following JOBS orientation: job club or job search, education, training, work experience, or life management skills programs. In MDRC's studies of other mandatory welfare-to-work initiatives in the 1980s and early 1990s, approximately 38 to 70 percent of the orientation attenders in those programs took part in at least one activity within follow-up periods that were approximately one year.

- **A uniform national participation standard can impose a very varied burden on different states, making it difficult to create a “level playing field” for all localities and states.**

The range of percentages shown in Table 1 reflects the fact that participation rates, defined identically, are different for each of the three sites. With respect to column 5, one reason is that Atlanta, Grand Rapids, and Riverside have different proportions of JOBS-mandatory individuals who simultaneously work (usually part-time) and receive welfare, reflecting differences in state AFDC grant levels and rules. If employment while receiving welfare is not counted as “participation,” high-grant states, or states with generous income disregards, will have lower participation rates, other things being equal. In Atlanta, located in the lowest-grant state of the three, only 5 percent of JOBS-mandatory individuals in a typical month are employed for at least 15 hours per week while receiving AFDC, compared to approximately 8 percent in Grand Rapids (Michigan's grant levels are slightly above the median for all states) and 19 percent in Riverside (which is in a high-grant state).⁸

Variations in AFDC caseload demographics and labor markets would also influence how easily these sites could meet various participation standards.

- **Monthly participation measures or standards for any given month understate the full extent of AFDC recipients' participation or employment because these statuses are dynamic. Between 41 and 52 percent of those who were JOBS-mandatory in a particular month participated in a JOBS activity at some point within the 24 months following their JOBS orientation.**

To examine the extent to which non-participation in a typical month was a temporary or permanent status, a simple definition of participation being active at all in a JOBS activity at some point in a month (shown as measure “E” in Table 1) was used. Using this definition,

⁷ Gayle Hamilton, *Interim Report on the Saturation Work Initiative Model in San Diego* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1988).

⁸ Sample members were not eligible for current Michigan policy, begun in late 1992, which increases work incentives for welfare recipients by increasing income disregards in the calculation of AFDC grants.

between 16 and 28 percent of the individuals who were JOBS-mandatory in a typical month participated in a JOBS activity at all in that month. (See the last row of column 5 of Table 1.)

This participation rate increases markedly, however, when one reformulates the question and asks how many of the individuals for whom JOBS was mandatory in a typical month ever participated in a JOBS activity, in case they had just stopped participating in job search, work experience, education, or training in the previous month or had begun these activities in the following month. The results (not shown in Table 1) indicate that between 41 and 52 percent of the JOBS-mandatory individuals in a month participated at some point within the 24 months following their orientation to JOBS, even if they were not participating in the “typical” month examined for the analysis.

- **It should not be assumed that all non-participants are individuals who were simply ignored by program staff.**

There are clear-cut reasons for never participating at all in a JOBS activity, even over a 24-month period. Large numbers of those who never participated in JOBS after attending a JOBS orientation became employed, left AFDC, became no longer mandatory for JOBS, or were referred for sanction quickly (i.e., within three months of orientation). This was true for over one-half of the non-participants in Atlanta, and almost three-quarters of those in Grand Rapids and Riverside.

- **One reason sites do not have higher monthly participation rates is that they do not have sufficient resources.**

Increasing participation requires enough staff to quickly provide JOBS orientations to all JOBS-mandatory AFDC recipients and assign them to JOBS activities, to closely monitor individuals’ participation and progress, and to react in a timely manner to individuals’ non-compliance with program requirements. In addition, activities (e.g., job club) and support services (e.g., child care) need to be provided.

Many individuals who were JOBS-mandatory in a typical month had not yet received an orientation to JOBS the usual precursor to assignment to and participation in a JOBS activity. Between 51 and 72 percent of JOBS-mandatory individuals in the three sites had been through an orientation prior to or during the months studied for this report. In one of the sites Atlanta there were lengthy waiting lists for orientation slots owing to funding shortages. During 1992 and 1993 (the overall time period studied for this report), six months had typically elapsed in Atlanta between the date Atlanta JOBS staff were notified that an individual was JOBS-mandatory and the date the individual was scheduled to attend a JOBS orientation; in Grand Rapids and Riverside, this span was usually between one and three weeks.

A substantial share of the JOBS-mandatory individuals who had attended a JOBS orientation did not participate in JOBS during the months studied for reasons that could reflect program funding levels. As shown in the first panel of Table 2, using the most expansive or lenient participation definition, between 58 and 76 percent of the JOBS-mandatory individuals who had already attended JOBS orientations in the three sites participated at all in a JOBS activity, were employed at all, or were in the process of being sanctioned at some point during a typical month (but were not necessarily in one of these statuses every week during the month). These JOBS orientation attenders could be considered to be meeting a minimal JOBS obligation or being penalized for their non-participation. According to the second panel of Table 2, about one-fifth of JOBS-mandatory individuals who had attended an orientation before or during a

Table 2
The JOBS Evaluation
Percent of Sample Members Who Were or Were Not Involved in JOBS
in a Typical Month, By Reason, for Sample Members
Who Had Attended a JOBS Orientation

Status During Month	Atlanta	Grand Rapids	Riverside
Involved in JOBS (%)	58.3	76.2	63.1
Participated at all in a JOBS activity	41.6	41.9	22.6
Employed while receiving AFDC (a)	7.2	16.1	29.3
Sanctioned (i.e., AFDC grant reduced) for not participating	4.4	16.9	n/a
Slated to be sanctioned	6.6	10.2	15.4
Not involved, for reasons potentially correctable with more JOBS funding or changes in case monitoring procedures (%)	22.6	11.9	16.1
Child care issues	0.4	1.0	4.1
No transportation available	0.2	0.3	4.5
JOBS activity provider issues (b)	0.2	0.4	0.0
Non-cooperation where sanctions were neither imposed nor requested during the month	7.8	3.6	4.3
Case workers had lost track of clients, i.e., no documentation could be found as to why individuals were not participating	12.6	6.5	4.1
Case workers slow to respond to changes in clients' situations	1.9	0.5	0.2
Not involved, for reasons essentially unrelated to JOBS funding or case monitoring procedures (%)	19.2	11.8	20.9
Individual or family member ill or incapacitated	9.8	5.7	7.9
Housing issues	0.6	0.6	2.4
Other personal issues	0.7	0.5	7.2
Became no longer JOBS-mandatory or verification of reason for status change from JOBS-mandatory to JOBS-exempt was pending	1.2	1.3	4.1
In assessment to determine next JOBS assignment	0.7	0.7	0.0
Awaiting activity assignment from case worker	2.4	2.4	0.6
Assigned to JOBS activity, waiting for it to begin	5.1	3.7	3.6
Sample size	287/319	295/332	206/209

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from MDRC-collected JOBS case file data.

NOTES: The sample for this table consists of a random sample of individuals who were randomly assigned to a research group as part of the JOBS Evaluation from April 1992 through December 1992. Two months were selected as the focus for the participation study - October and November 1992 - and this table presents averages for these months. Sample sizes are shown for each of the two months. Indicators shown in this table reflect individuals' statuses in at least one week during the month. As a result, individuals can be in more than one status in a month. In this table, the three major statuses are prioritized in the order shown. If an individual was participating in one week and did not participate in another week in the month because of a child care issue, for example, the individual is shown in the "participated" row and

typical month were not affected by a JOBS obligation for reasons that appear to result from resource shortages: Between 1 and 9 percent (depending on the site) were not active because of child care or transportation issues; and staff had temporarily “lost track” of, or had not swiftly followed up on or begun the sanctioning process for, another 9 to 22 percent. This suggests that, in some cases, staff caseloads had become too large or client tracking systems were faulty.

- **Some non-participation in JOBS is not the result of limited funds. In any given month, between 12 and 21 percent of the JOBS-mandatory AFDC recipients are in situations reflecting illness or the schedules of program activities that are unlikely to change with more funding or different case management procedures.**

According to the third panel of Table 2, a sizeable share of individuals who had already attended program orientations (12 to 21 percent, depending on the site) would not have been able to participate, even with additional program funding or program procedure changes. Depending on the site, between 6 and 10 percent of the orientation attenders required to participate in JOBS during a typical month did not participate because they or a family member were ill or incapacitated during the month.⁹ Another approximately 4 percent had been assigned to a JOBS activity, but were waiting for it to begin. Other individuals were in a variety of situations, including awaiting a JOBS activity assignment from their caseworker.

- **If activity in the three sites stayed at the levels measured for 1992, these sites would fall far short of the ultimate participation standards contained in the 1995 welfare reform bills, though all had extensive experience operating mandatory JOBS programs that were tough and were successful in substantially reducing the number of individuals receiving AFDC.**

Current (July 1995) welfare reform bills define participation standards with a denominator of all or most AFDC case heads. It is possible to estimate the percentages of individuals who could reasonably be exempted from the welfare-to-work program participation requirements in the current bills if assumptions are used based on detailed data available from Columbus, Ohio one of the JOBS Evaluation sites as well as HHS-prepared statistics on the ages of children in the national AFDC caseload in 1992. Combining these two data sources, it appears that approximately 34 percent of all single-parent cases examined in these three sites could be exempted from a welfare-to-work participation requirement if the bills exempted single-parent AFDC cases consisting only of children less than 16 years of age (6 percent of AFDC cases in a month) or cases in which the case head is: a 16- to 18-year-old in school full-time (6 percent of the AFDC cases in a month); incapacitated (6 percent of AFDC cases in a month); in at least the second trimester of pregnancy (2 percent of AFDC cases in a month); at home, caring for an ill family member (2 percent of AFDC cases in a month); the parent of a child younger than 1 year of age (10 percent of AFDC cases in a month); or in other situations (such as being over the age of 60 or living in a remote area) associated with exemptions under JOBS (2 percent of AFDC cases in a month).

The current welfare reform bills all specify participation measures that require at least 20 hours of activity per week (per individual per month), and impose penalties on states if they do not achieve monthly participation rates that start as low as 4 to 35 percent in 1997, and then steadily increase, reaching 50 percent by the year 2003. Assuming that the same numbers of individuals will participate, be employed, or become sanctioned in each week in a month in

⁹ All caseworkers in two of the sites and some caseworkers in the third site required a doctor’s statement to temporarily excuse an individual from JOBS participation because of illness or incapacitation.

Atlanta, Grand Rapids, and Riverside as was the case during the months studied for this report, “participation” or “coverage” rates can be determined for the 66 percent of the AFDC case heads in a month who might be required to be active under the new bills. If the numerator of the participation standard were defined as those who participated in a JOBS activity for at least 20 hours per week or were employed for at least 15 hours per week while receiving AFDC, in each week during the month, 12 percent of the newly defined mandatory cases in these three sites would be “participating.” On a site-by-site basis, this rate would range from 8 percent in Atlanta to 15 percent in Grand Rapids. If the numerator of the standard were to be defined as those who participated in a JOBS activity for at least 20 hours per week, were employed for at least 15 hours per week, or were sanctioned (requested or imposed) in each week during the month, 16 percent of the newly defined mandatory cases could be considered to be fulfilling a welfare obligation, with the rate ranging from 10 percent in Atlanta to 25 percent in Grand Rapids.

Thus, assuming no changes in funding, welfare regulations, or welfare recipients’ behavior, the above simulation indicates that the three sites examined for this report would fall far short of meeting the ultimate participation standards contained in the welfare reform bills under debate in July 1995, even allowing for a 34 percent exemption rate. This is noteworthy in that these sites had extensive experience operating welfare-to-work programs prior to JOBS and operated well-run, mandatory programs, suggesting that their participation rates probably represent near the upper limits of the rates possible under JOBS (without taking into account the effects of substantially increasing AFDC income disregards). Furthermore, all three sites were successful in reducing the number of individuals receiving AFDC (measured two years after entry into the programs). This suggests that these three sites would need to experience dramatic changes in program rules and practices, welfare recipients’ behavior, or funding in order to reach the ultimate standards of the current welfare reform bills.