THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WELFARE FRAUD:
THE IMPACT ON FRONT-LINE WORKERS AND WELFARE RECIPIENTS
IN BRITISH COLUMBIA (1993 - 1996)

by

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Abstract

This study is centered around examining the impact that the recent welfare reform has had on front-line workers in the welfare bureaucracy and the clients of the welfare system. In 1993 the government in British Columbia began implementing sweeping policy and procedural changes that altered the way in which welfare services were provided and limited the services available to the poor. The impetus for these changes is situated in the widespread media coverage of welfare fraud and abuse throughout 1993 and 1994. The media, by targeting certain sub-groups of the welfare client population, was able to substantiate their claim that the welfare system was not only being undermined but that it was also operating on the basis of policies that were flawed and therefore easily abused. This study begins with a presentation of the policy and procedural changes that have occurred within the Ministry of Social Services in British Columbia from 1993 to 1996. The second section of this study examines the media's response to the "welfare fraud crisis" and the way in which a moral panic was created around the "problem" of welfare fraud. This analysis draws upon moral panic and social constructionist theory to examine not only the media's presentation of the "crisis" but also the government's response to the public concern that had been generated. The final section of this study presents a discussion of the front-line worker's response to the changes that have taken place within the Ministry of Social Services over the last four years. The analysis is centered around examining how these front-line government workers cope with the restrictive and regulatory policies they are responsible for enforcing. The study concludes with suggestion for further research on this topic.
Dedication

For my son Kayvan,
My greatest joy and my biggest distraction.
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I would like to thank Brian Elliot, Department Head of Anthropology and Sociology, for his direction, understanding, and patience. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my thesis committee members, Becky Ross and Ken Stoddard, for their support and encouragement. Many thanks go out to my co-workers who volunteered their time to participate in this study - you know who you are. To Shahram, who looked after our son and freed up time for me to work. Last, but not least, I would like to thank my Mom for continually reminding me that I could get this done.
On July 13, 1992 I began my career as a Financial Assistance Worker in the Ministry of Social Services in British Columbia. My six week on-the-job training period took place in an office on Vancouver’s central eastside and despite the seemingly overwhelming amount of policies and office procedures I had to learn I was eager to help the “less fortunate” and to make a difference in the lives of the clients with whom I came in contact. Within the first six months of my employment however I began to realize that the work I was required to do was quite different from that which I had expected. My utopian ideals of being able to free the poor from the bondages of poverty or, at the very least, make their lives more bearable, were not being realized. I was becoming caught up in a system that not only limited the life choices of the poor through less than meagre entitlements but that also negated the welfare recipients’ subjective experience of poverty. The human face of poverty that I had responded to during my initial contact with clients in the welfare system became overshadowed by the persistent emphasis that was placed on identifying only the objective condition of those applying for benefits.

Over the course of my employment as a front-line worker in the welfare bureaucracy I also began to realize that the system was engaged in creating a “reality” of poverty and it was through the “truths” contained within the policies and mandates that this reality was perpetuated. Rather than being conceptualized in terms of the unequal distribution of income in Capitalist society and an overall lack of meaningful employment, poverty within
the welfare system was treated as being an individual problem. Welfare policies reinforced the conservative ideology that it was the responsibility of the welfare recipient to get off and remain off income assistance. Poverty was avoidable according to the tenets of the welfare system and therefore it seemed almost fitting to keep the benefit rates low and to place the onus on the welfare recipient to better his/her existence. Despite the fact that I was able to recognize the inherent injustice of the welfare system and the falsity of the manufactured "truths" I became engaged in maintaining that reality to which I had become a part. I found myself defending the emerging right-wing agenda of the welfare bureaucracy and, in some distorted way, making sense of the inconsistent and inequitable rules I was required to follow in the assessment of eligibility and the disbursement of benefits. My relationships with clients suffered as did my self-image.

In Poverty's Bonds (1996) Patrick Burman discusses the notion of "role conflict" which refers to the limitations that welfare workers confront due to the conflicting roles they assume in the performance of their jobs. A worker in the welfare bureaucracy is expected to help those in need but he/she is, at the same time, also required to follow the rules set forth in policy. The notion of "role conflict" for me was three-pronged. Not only was I an enabler and controller in the welfare system but I was also a critical sociologist trying to make sense of the structure of the welfare system and how, by its very nature, separated workers from those whom they were trying to assist. Even those workers who truly believed they could 'help' welfare recipients were restricted by the prejudices inherent in the welfare system's policies and procedures.

By the end of 1994 I had become disillusioned with my job as a welfare worker and I was struggling with the ideals and values that I had embraced when I began my career and the cynicism that had subsequently engulfed me. It was at that time when I started to
take a critical look at the welfare system and the impact that working in welfare had on myself and my co-workers. It was also at that time when the government in British Columbia began implementing harsher welfare policies geared both to reduce the number of people receiving welfare payments and to address the welfare fraud “problem” that had been identified by the media. The BC government’s handling of the welfare “crisis” and their overall move towards creating a welfare system that embraced and promoted right wing idealism prompted me to examine, from a sociological perspective, the impact that the overhaul of the welfare system had on those who work in it. Although my research project is focussed primarily on front-line workers I realized that an examination of the work environment would not be complete without including a discussion of welfare recipients whose lives hang in the balance of governmental policy.

My study is centered around examining the processes involved in the construction of a social problem. More specifically, I am concerned with addressing how individuals, whose job it is to enforce the tactics that are created to address the perceived “problem”, are affected. I chose to use the welfare office as the setting for my study for two primary reasons. First, it is within the welfare office that many of the inherent problems resulting from the welfare reform are evidenced. The welfare office is the point of contact between those in desperate need of financial assistance and the workers who are seriously limited in the type and scope of benefits they are able to provide. The real consequences of the welfare system’s controversial policies and procedures are displayed in the welfare office.

Secondly, as a front-line worker myself, I have witnessed first hand the effects that the changes have had on my co-workers and clients alike. My interest in this study was sparked by my own struggles with the government’s uncompromising reaction to the welfare fraud “crisis”.
My study of the welfare system is unique in that I bring to the study my inside knowledge of the workings of the bureaucracy. I approached this project not as an outsider looking in but as an active participant in identifying, analysing, and reflecting upon my own experience as a front-line worker during the welfare reform. Throughout this process I have had to re-think my own position and how I too contributed to the creation and perpetuation of certain myths surrounding welfare recipients and welfare fraud.

My analysis of the welfare system is written primarily from my perspective as a sociologist. However, my position as a front-line worker and, hence, a subject also played a part in the analysis. I have, throughout this study, tried to distance myself from my own biases and subjective interpretations with regards to the welfare system's treatment of workers and clients but this has been a difficult if not impossible feat. In defence, I believe that my inside knowledge of the welfare bureaucracy has had much to offer in the analysis and has lent uniqueness to my study. It is for this reason that I have not disengaged myself from those with whom I work. Rather, this research project reflects as much of my own trials and tribulations of working on the front-line of welfare as it does my co-workers.

Carolyn Ellis (1995), for instance, argues in favour of the researcher's use of personal experiences within the research process. She suggests that we, as researchers, should "emphasize how our experiences conjoin or connect us with others, rather than the ways they set us apart". (94) She also adds that to write from a position of "connectedness" is to "honour" and "empower" those we study. It must be noted however that although this study has allowed me to identify with those who I am studying, this is not always possible in sociological research. Studies that examine the controversial position of some subject groups (ie., skinheads, Nazis, etc.) are not conducted with the purpose of "empowering" or "honouring" these groups. The range of topics examined in sociological research and the
use of particular research subjects in these studies encompasses a varying degree of personal "connectedness" on behalf of the researcher.

In Chapter Two of this study I identify the policy, procedural, and legislative changes that took place between 1991 and 1996 in the Ministry of Social Services in British Columbia.¹ Numerous changes have occurred over this five year period and I have highlighted those which I believe have had the most noticeable impact on workers and clients. I chose to speak of the impact that the new welfare policies have had on clients and workers by including two sections that address each group specifically. The data for this chapter was gathered from government reports, policy manuals and amendments, and operational directives. I also made use of newsletters and discussion papers written by welfare advocacy groups and members of the BCGEU Local 603. The purpose of this chapter was to highlight the magnitude of the changes and the ramifications for both clients and workers.

Chapter Three begins with a discussion of the "moral panic" that was created out of the widespread media reports on welfare fraud in British Columbia between 1993 and 1994. The theoretical framework in which I study the welfare fraud issue draws upon concepts from both the moral panic perspective (Cohen; 1980) and social constructionism (Spector, Kituse; 1977, Gusfield; 1981). In my analysis of the welfare fraud problem I also included a discussion of the media and the role that the media played in the creation of this moral panic. (Hall;1978, Howitt;1982, Fishman;1981) The media stories dealing with welfare

¹Prior to 1997 the Income Assistance Program and Family and Children Services were under the direction of the Ministry of Social Services. In April of 1997 two new Ministries were created, in part, as a result of the recommendations made by the Gove Inquiry. The Income Assistance Program is now regulated by the Ministry of Human Resources and Family and Children Services are under the control of the Ministry of Children and Families. Throughout this study, for the sake of consistency, the Ministry of Social Services will be used to refer to the governing body of the welfare system in British Columbia.
fraud and abuse in 1993 and 1994 targeted certain segments of the welfare population and, the moralizing that took place with respect to these groups, prompted me to examine the ways in which the moral regulation of the poor continues to shape society's understanding of poverty and those receiving government aid. (Little; 1994, Burman; 1990, Wall; 1993) By linking the creation of the welfare fraud crisis to certain segments of the welfare population I was able to demonstrate not only how the moral panic was generated but how it was sustained and legitimated.

Chapter Four reveals the findings of the interviews that I conducted with front-line workers in the Ministry of Social Services in British Columbia. My examination is centered around exploring the impact that the changes that were made to the welfare system between 1993 and 1996 have had on those who work in it. I situate my discussion within the framework of Barbara Misztal's (1996) analysis of trust and betrayal in modern society by highlighting excerpts from the interviews that reveal the workers' disillusionment with the welfare reform process and the consequences it has had for them and their clients. The effect that computer technology has had on the workplace and the workers' ability to provide services to clients is also explored in this chapter. I also include a section that analyses how front-line workers in the welfare system have been able to distance themselves from the action taken by the government in the recent welfare reform. This examination is centered around identifying how workers use "loose moral talk" to make sense of the welfare reform and the current welfare administration's treatment of them and their clients. (Schneider; 1984)

The final chapter presents a summary of my thesis and suggestions for further research on this topic.
"A woman, single and without children, came to British Columbia to escape threats to her life. She had been threatened and stalked in another province. The police had reports of her repeated experiences and had actually suggested that one of her options to increase her safety was to move. Under fear for her life she came to Vancouver. One reason she chose Vancouver was because she didn't know anyone here so that left less clues for her stalker to trace or follow her. She told only her parents of her destination. She was denied welfare benefits due to the three month residency requirement. Although exceptions could be made for women leaving spousal relationships where abuse was a factor and for women with children, this woman's relationship was not seen as spousal. No attempt was made to confirm her situation with the police in her previous province."

"A single man came into apply for welfare benefits and was denied regular assistance due to excess assets. The man had cancer and was dying. His assets were a remote cabin and property in northern British Columbia. Due to the season, winter, a real estate agent was unable to access the property to assess the value, list it and show the property to interested buyers. This man was provided with hardship assistance under the assets in excess category. Under the hardship policy he was not eligible for medical coverage through the Ministry of Social Services. He died with no medical coverage."
"An 83 year old man recently arrived from Manitoba. He received his pension totalling $906 in Manitoba and used his funds to travel to BC to rent a room. He came in to apply for assistance for food and other needs. This man had never applied for assistance before and appeared to have legitimate reasons for coming to Vancouver. He was pursuing income as a World War II veteran whose records had been lost and he hoped to find pertinent information in Esquimalt where he had trained. Because of his income he was not eligible for any assistance, not even money for food."

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"One of the eligibility rules that has arisen out of the welfare reform concerns people who quit their jobs. Just over a year ago, one Financial Assistance Worker was directed by her acting District Supervisor to deny a woman income assistance because the job that she had recently quit had been held for six weeks (just over the one month time limit set under this policy). The woman had been working as a stripper."¹

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The incidents described above illustrate the changing nature of the work performed by front line workers in the welfare system. Over the last 5 years, the welfare system in British Columbia has undergone major legislative and procedural changes in an attempt to address the increasing number of individuals in need of government assistance. High unemployment rates (especially among youth), federal cutbacks to the Employment Insurance Program, and a labour market characterized by increasing part-time and short-term employment, have contributed to the burgeoning welfare rolls in British Columbia.

¹These five client stories were borrowed from a report that was presented to the leadership of the British Columbia Government Employee's Union in April of 1997 by members of the FAW committee (Component 6), Members of Component 12, and the Social Action Committee (Component 6).
between 1990 and 1995. At a time when more and more individuals find themselves having to rely on the welfare system for financial aide, the government in BC has begun implementing policies that have made it more difficult for applicants to qualify for assistance, and it is the front line workers who bear much of the escalating frustration of client's whose welfare benefits are reduced or whose requests for assistance are denied.

This chapter will present an in-depth look into the major changes that have been made to British Columbia's welfare system over the last five years. In 1993 incidences of welfare fraud and abuse began appearing in local media reports and by the end of that year, the government was under considerable pressure to address the widespread public concern. The declining public trust in the income assistance program coupled with increasing numbers of people applying for assistance resulted in the development and implementation of policies that placed increased scrutiny on clients' claims for welfare benefits. The changes that have occurred will be presented in three phases beginning with the response to the media reports in 1993 of the alleged prevalence of welfare fraud and abuse, to the subsequent tightening up of eligibility rules and increased surveillance of the client population, and finally the development of specific programs designed to move certain client groups off the welfare rolls and into the work force. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the impact these changes have had not only on the clients of the welfare system, but also those who work "in welfare".

Background and Context

In February 1994, the Report of the Minister's Advisory Council on Income Assistance, was presented to the Minister of Social Services in British Columbia. The Report identified the numerous shortfalls of the current welfare system, primarily
addressing the failure of the system to provide for the needs of a changing client population.

The Report stated:

The GAIN Act is unable to meet the income security needs of the 1990's. It is out of date and needs to be changed. New social trends, such as increasing numbers of single parent families, the difficulty in finding affordable, quality child care, child poverty, an aging population, and the quest for autonomy of Aboriginal people are just a few of the factors that are combining to significantly change the needs of our society. (3-4)

One area of concern raised by the Advisory Council centered around the antiquated and ambiguous language found within the Guaranteed Available Income for Need Act and Regulations. The GAIN Act, created in 1976 through the amalgamation of three existing acts, outlined services ranging from the provision of basic food and shelter benefits to health, daycare, homemaker and employment training services. Although the GAIN Act had not undergone an overall review since its enactment, the GAIN regulations that outlined the programs of the income assistance division, the means of determining eligibility, and rates of assistance were subject to amendment. A change in government often resulted in minor changes being made to the GAIN regulations.² Welfare rates were adjusted and some programs were expanded and revised. Although the basic thrust of the legislation was impacted by the political ideology of the party in power, the language of the Act and Regulations remained ambiguous. The Act and Regulations spelled out in legal discourse the circumstances under which income assistance benefits could or could not be provided to clients but they were not clear with regards to the 'exception to policy' cases that often arose. Case-conferencing between workers as a means of deciphering the 'rules' to fit a particular client's situation was commonplace.

²On April 1, 1997 the GAIN Act and Regulations was replaced by BC Benefits Legislation which addressed all of the changes that had been made to welfare policy between 1993 and 1996. The proclamation of the new welfare legislation solidified the NDP Government's conservative approach to the delivery of welfare services to the poor.
The Advisory Council argued that the interpretation of policies was often detrimental to those seeking help. Financial Assistance Workers, it was held, were imbued with the power to interpret the "grey" areas of policies and the prevalence of worker discretion further exacerbated the powerlessness of the poor.

The Act's ambiguous language means that it must be interpreted - usually by those who have the power to deny assistance. This need to interpret the Act creates a power imbalance that often victimizes the province's poor. (Advisory Council, 1994:4)

Critics argued however, that the vagueness of certain policies could and did work in the client's favour in certain circumstances. For instance, discretionary payments were made to clients who had no other resources available to them and who claimed to be facing and immediate danger to their health. Although the amount of funds issued to a client was at the discretion of the worker, it was the client who held the balance of power in having his/her request granted. The vagueness of the policy virtually guaranteed that the client's request would be granted as the worker had no basis to deny a request even though an abuse of the intention of policy might appear evident.

In contrast to the Advisory Council's report that clients were often victimized by the discretionary powers of Financial Assistance Workers, some critics of the welfare system also expressed concerns in regards to the ease in which clients could manipulate the rules and use the ambiguous nature of the policies to their advantage. The administration of welfare benefits was viewed as being done inconsistently and haphazardly and therefore was considered to be advantageous for the clients of the system and detrimental to the system itself. A client who was denied a particular benefit, it was argued, need only change

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3In 1993, newspaper articles appeared in which both the Liberal and Socred Opposition Parties targeted the NDP's Ministry of Social Services as being too lax with regards to the issuing of benefits and the overall mismanagement of the welfare system. (Province, May 14, 1993: A5; Province May 16, 1993: A6)
his/her story or his/her worker to have the request granted. The lack of proper monitoring techniques was also thought to contribute to the mismanagement of the welfare system. The relationship between the worker and the client was one based on a tenuous form of trust. The client presented his/her situation to the worker who in turn would use the information relayed by the client to determine his/her eligibility for assistance. There were few avenues available to the worker to confirm the legitimacy of the client's story and it was cautiously accepted that if the client was requesting assistance, he/she must be in need.

The worker's ability to monitor client requests for assistance was also hampered by time constraints. Decisions were normally made quickly with little time available for workers to assess fully all of the factors that may have influenced the client's eligibility for benefits. A normal intake interview for an individual applying for benefits was forty five minutes and within that time all of the relevant information had to be received, evaluated, verified, and acted upon. Same-day service was common practice in most offices with the client arriving in the morning for an assessment of their request and returning later that day for a cheque.

Despite the concerns raised by the Advisory Council in 1994, that the welfare system in British Columbia was failing to meet the needs of the poor, the public's attention was being diverted to the mismanagement of the system and the ease at which individuals could qualify for government aide. The growing public concern with the overall management of the welfare system was also fostered by the Federal Government's fiscal restraint.

Prior to 1990, the federally legislated Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) provided British Columbia with 50% of its annual welfare budget. However, CAP transfer payments to the province decreased from 50% to 29% in 1990 which resulted in welfare system demanding more of the Province's fiscal budget to support a growing number of people affected by rising unemployment and a diminishing job market. Coupled with substantial cutbacks to
CAP transfer payments was the increasing number of individuals arriving in BC from other provinces across Canada. Throughout the early 1990's BC maintained the lowest unemployment rate in the country which acted as an incentive for those from Eastern provinces to move to BC with the hopes of finding work. Upwards of two thousand people per month were arriving in BC in 1993, many of whom made their way onto the welfare system when the job market in BC proved to be less accommodating than had been anticipated. The caseload of persons needing assistance rose 10.4 percent in 1993 alone and the direct cost of the welfare system for BC tax payers in 1993 was 1.8 billion dollars and rising due to a lagging economy and escalating migration. (Advisory Council, 1995:4)

The impact of high unemployment and growing migration on BC’s welfare system was underscored by payment rate reductions to the Unemployment Insurance Program and longer delays for the issuance of UI benefits. As well, the UIC rules were amended which made those individuals who had quit or were fired from their employment ineligible for UI benefits. Individuals caught in the six to eight week waiting period for UI benefits and those who were disqualified from receiving UI benefits because they had quit or were fired from their employment added to the growing number of people dependent on the welfare system.

With a 10.4% increase in welfare caseloads in 1993 alone, and more than three hundred thousand people in BC in need of some form of income assistance to a cost of 1.8 billion dollars per annum, the welfare system came under vocal criticism in the local media. 4 The welfare system in BC was targeted as being not only costly, but also one that was poorly administered due to the existence of complacent and ambiguous policies that left it open to abuse.

The media reports that began appearing in 1993 maintained that incidents of welfare

4See Appendix I for a summary of Welfare System expenditures in 1993.
recipients making fraudulent claims were common place within the welfare system. The reports highlighted the ease at which clients would qualify for assistance by providing false information. The Ministry of Social Services, it was argued, issued benefits according to policies that were not only flawed but that also provided virtually no means of verifying client information. Some critics estimated that upwards of 20% of the Province's welfare budget was wasted on fraudulent claims. (Province, May 20, 1993:A3)

The media also maintained that in addition to the prevalence of fraud, the welfare system was also subject to other forms of abuse. Reports of welfare recipients receiving funds for such things as car insurance, expensive hotel stays, computer equipment and controversial therapies, added to the growing public disillusionment with the intent of the welfare system. The widely held notion that the welfare system's function was to maintain a minimal standard of living for the less fortunate was challenged by media reports that portrayed welfare as a means, for some, to attain benefits that many working class individuals could not afford.

In Policing the Crisis (1978), Stuart Hall distinguishes between the "primary" and "secondary" definers of news events. He argues that due to the strict time constraints in the production of news coupled with the media's claim of objectivity, journalists are dependent on those in "powerful and privileged institutional positions". (58) The opinions of these "spokesmen" become the defining feature of the news event and shape the meaning imposed on a particular event. Hall (1978) writes:

....the media are frequently not the 'primary definers' of news events at all; but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in reproducing the definitions of those who have privileged access, as of right, to the media as 'accredited sources'. (59)

In the reporting of stories concerning welfare fraud, the "primary definers" were the political
opposition and later, the NDP government. The initial news coverage of welfare fraud detailed those who had been caught defrauding the government of significantly high amounts of money. The information for these stories was derived from court cases of those who had been convicted of the criminal offence of fraud. Despite the rarity of this type of high profile welfare fraud, the “facts” of these cases were used to convey the seriousness of the problem and intensify the suspicion of the welfare population.

In the fall of 1992 the NDP government conducted an internal investigation into administrative error and fraud within the welfare system. The contents of the report were leaked to the public in 1993 which forced the Minister of Social Services, Joan Smallwood, to respond. She initially denied the existence of the report and claimed that the “fraud problem” withing the Ministry was minimal. However, when the report was made public Smallwood was forced to address the problem. The response by the government shaped the way in which the welfare fraud “problem” was subsequently dealt with. Rather than addressing the high end fraud (i.e. multiple identity, forged cheques) that had initially been identified by the media, the government reacted by calling into question the widespread abuse of the system by welfare “varmints”. The government became the “primary” definer of the welfare fraud “crisis” in media reports as a means of performing damage control. More importantly however, in becoming the “primary definers”, the government was able to impose meaning onto the problem which ultimately resulted in welfare clients being deemed responsible for the Ministry’s “waste” of public funds. The result was the creation of new control measures within the Ministry of Social Services as well as the tightening up of welfare policies.

Reaction to Welfare Fraud
A New Regime of Enforcement

The first in the series of changes made to the welfare system addressed the concerns raised in regards to the alleged prevalence of welfare fraud. The Prevention, Compliance and Enforcement Unit was established in 1994 in an attempt to increase public confidence in the income support program. The PCE division of the Ministry of Social Services is comprised of three distinct components designed to prevent fraud from occurring, ensure a high level of compliance with the GAIN Act and regulations, and enforce the law through the criminal prosecution of those charged with fraud.

The prevention component of the PCE division is made up of Verification Officers. Verification officers are responsible for confirming all relevant information provided by the client at the initial assessment for welfare benefits. In the performance of their duties, VOs have access to a wide range of methods used in the confirmation of information provided by the client. Landlords and past employers are contacted and current bank and other relevant financial information is obtained through the Equifax system. As well, home visits are routinely conducted to verify the address of the client and to determine whether or not a spousal relationship exists.

The scope of the pre-eligibility investigation performed by VOs is intended to discourage applicants who may provide false or misleading information from pursuing their claim for benefits. This new form of enforcement, however, also diverts applicants from pursuing welfare benefits by virtue of its intrusive nature. Applicants who feel that a home

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5. In 1997, the authority to monitor the Prevention component of the PCE was transferred to the Income Support Program. Verification Officers now report to the District Supervisor in the welfare office and the design of the program is under the jurisdiction of the Region Manager.

6. Equifax is a commercial credit rating agency. Information available through the Equifax system relates to the individual's credit history and current registered debts. It is used to determine bank account information, past and/or present employment status, and marital status.
visit, usually unannounced, by a Verification Officer or a phone call to their past employer, bank, or landlord may be too humiliating a process to endure. There are also risks for the applicant who, as a result of a “pre-eligibility investigation”, may lose their place of residence due to the fact that many landlords prefer not to rent suites to individuals on welfare. For these reasons, applications for welfare benefits may be abandoned. The Ministry, however, views the abandonment of a claim as a “success” in that someone has been discouraged from attempting to obtain benefits on false pretences.

The Compliance component of the PCE is made up of Eligibility Officers who conduct specialized projects geared to ensure that the requirements of the GAIN Act and Regulations are being adhered to. Examples of some of the projects conducted by EOs are investigations into a client’s living arrangements when their rent costs exceed their monthly welfare entitlement, examination of a client’s identity when identification documents are missing from the file or cannot be produced by the client, and the review of clients who have been receiving welfare benefits for an extended period of time, but who have had little or no contact with the district office since establishing their claim.

Data matches with welfare programs in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba and with Federal Income Support programs are also reviewed by EOs to determine if a client has been receiving benefits fraudulently from another jurisdiction. The data matches conducted by Eligibility Officers illustrate the increasing scope of welfare client surveillance to include both Federal and other Provincial jurisdictions. Although initially there were some technical problems in the implementation of data matches with other income support programs, the practice of “tracking” a welfare client’s government payments was touted as being a cost-effective measure as well as a deterrent to those clients who may take advantage of the public purse. Data matches ensure that the poor do not receive more
than that which a particular government agency deems them eligible for and it also restricts the movement of those clients who wish to relocate to another province. The inter-provincial data matches identify those clients who have "double-dipped" for as little as one month, despite the fact that they have often had to use their total monthly entitlement, issued from their previous place of residence, to relocate.

The Enforcement component of the PCE is comprised of Ministry Investigators and Assistant Ministry Investigators whose primary function is the prosecution of those charged with defrauding the welfare system. Prior to the development of the PCE, Ministry Investigators were responsible for conducting investigations into all referred claims that were suspicious. The high number of cases referred under the old system made it difficult for Investigators to pursue fraudulent claims. The VO and EO positions that were created by the PCE division have enabled the investigators to focus solely on gathering evidence against a client suspected of welfare fraud and proceeding with the laying of charges when warranted. The cases pursued by Ministry Investigators are often high profile involving large amounts of money that has been obtained fraudulently. They are also the cases that attract the most media attention and are used to justify the implementation of tighter control measures in the Ministry of Social Services.

In addition to the creation of the PCE unit, the Ministry of Social Services also conducted initiatives such as random cheque pick-ups and client eligibility report cards. The Government claimed that periodic full-scale client reviews were successful in the elimination of some fraudulent claims. The initiatives also allowed the Government to

7The random cheque pick-ups involved having clients, who normally had their cheque mailed, come to the office on issue day and present identification in order to receive their cheque. The client eligibility report cards, on the other hand, asked detailed questions concerning the client's job search efforts. The report cards had to be returned to the office within one week or benefits would be terminated. Both the random cheque pick-up and client eligibility report card initiatives were used to confirm a client's identity and residence.
convey that they were indeed bearing down on the "welfare cheats" and taking the matter of welfare fraud seriously.

Policy Changes

The second set of changes made to the welfare system came in response to the negative public perception that welfare benefits were simply too easy to obtain and that existing procedures and lax policies enabled widespread abuse and waste of government funds. Commencing in 1995 the Ministry of Social Services introduced sweeping policy changes that limited the eligibility criteria for those applying for welfare. In October of 1995 the allowable asset levels were decreased from $2500 to $500 for single employable recipients. The allowable asset level refers to the amount of money or savings (cash, RRSP's, stocks, and any other 'investment' that can be converted to cash) that an individual applying for, or receiving welfare benefits, is allowed to possess. The policy change resulted in the disqualification of a number of clients who had been receiving benefits. Those clients who were made ineligible due to the decrease in the asset levels were forced off of the welfare system until such time as their net worth was within the allowable $500 limit. This policy also removed the "cushioning" for those individuals who were facing poverty due to loss of employment, disability, marital breakup, and so on. The government, in its fervour to drive some people further into poverty, wanted to ensure that those in need of welfare benefits were indeed poor by the time they reached the welfare office.

November of 1995 witnessed drastic changes to hardship policy which allowed for the issuance of discretionary payments to individuals who did not meet the eligibility requirements of regular income assistance benefits. Hardship benefits were available to
people awaiting other income (CPP, an ICBC settlement, etc), had assets that exceeded the allowable level or had other eligibility problems. The issuance of benefits under the new hardship policy requires that the client sign a repayment agreement which legally indebted them to the government for the amount of funds issued.

Hardship assistance was also made more difficult to qualify for by covering only those cases where it was clearly evident that extreme hardship would occur in the absence of some form of assistance. Although single and two parent families with young children applying for welfare were more likely to receive hardship benefits than were those applicants who were single and employable the benefit rate under the hardship classification was considerably lower. As well, those clients in receipt of regular welfare payments were not immune from having their claim diverted to hardship benefits, due to a change in circumstance, which meant the loss of medical coverage and a lower monthly support payment.

"Adam had been receiving Handicapped Benefits, but was put on hardship benefits because he is expecting a $6000 settlement from ICBC. Our advocates found that Adam dutifully told MSS that he was entitled to this settlement, but that there was a delay and he did not know when he would actually receive the money. In spite of the fact that Adam had not received this money, MSS cut him off Handicapped Benefits and he has been on Hardship for months." (Cited in Transition, BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, October 1996: 6)

"Our client, John, has MS and has been on Handicapped Benefits for many years. As he has gotten older, John has developed chronic pain and his mobility is increasingly limited. He owns a trailer that he used to live in, but is no longer workable for him with his deteriorating condition. During a recent review, MSS declared the trailer as an asset and bumped him on to Hardship Benefits. The trailer is worth a few thousand dollars at most and John has been trying to sell it for many months. Since being put on Hardship Benefits, John is finding it hard to cover the extra costs of his disability." (Cited in Transition BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, October 1996: 7)

Hardship policy was also applied to those applicants who had quit or were fired from
their employment. Previous welfare policy in this area rendered applicants who had lost
their employment due to their own misconduct ineligible for regular welfare benefits, but
hardship assistance was granted for the first benefit month. After receiving one month of
hardship assistance, the client then reverted to regular benefits. However, the new policy
made those who had lost their employment due to having quit or being fired, ineligible for
both forms of assistance for six months from the date their employment was terminated.
There were few exceptions built into the policy and for the most part the majority of clients
were denied benefits. This change to welfare policy mirrored that made to the
Unemployment Insurance system and left virtually no access to government support for
those individuals who were deemed responsible for their destitute situation.

The policy regarding the issuance of funds for work clothing and transportation was
restricted as well. Work clothing and bus-pass monies, prior to the policy change, were
issued to clients on demand. A client need only inform his/her worker that employment had
been found for the assistance for work-related clothing to be issued. As well, the issuance
of these benefits was not limited to a single event in that the client could receive several
work clothing grants within their time on welfare. The work clothing and transportation grant
was revised in November of 1995 and it became a "once in a lifetime" benefit. Not only was
the benefit limited in the number of times it could be issued, but the policy also required the
client to obtain written confirmation from his/her prospective employer that the job entailed
full-time permanent employment. The policy also stipulated that work transportation
assistance could be issued only after employment had been found. The provision for
transportation assistance to look for work was eliminated. Despite the fact that the
government's goal was to move people off the welfare rolls, the very benefits that were
d geared to assist them in becoming independent of income assistance were difficult, and in
The Ministry's crisis grant policy was also changed in November of 1995. Crisis grants are discretionary payments made in addition to a client's monthly entitlement to provide for a client's "unexpected need" in the event of a crisis when all other resources have been exhausted. Prior to November 1995, crisis grants were not monitored and there was no means of tracking the number of crisis grants on a client's file. In addition, crisis grants were issued to clients who had knowingly "mismanaged" their monthly entitlement and, as a result, required additional funds for food and shelter. Clients were questioned, sometimes in great detail, with regards to the circumstances that led to them to be in need of a crisis grant. The more valid a client's story appeared to be the more likely they were to receive a crisis grant.

The changes made to the crisis grant policy affected both the number of times a client could receive the grant as well as the criteria to be met in order for the grant to be issued. An additional computer screen was added which documented the frequency of crisis grants on a client's file. The new policy stipulated that the issuance of three consecutive grants would result in the 'administration' of a client's monthly benefits. Administration involves the payment of rent directly to the client's landlord and the dividing up of the client's support portion to be issued bi-monthly and, in some cases, weekly. The new policy was presented as a means of "assisting" those clients who frequently requested crisis grants and who were considered to be in need with respect to budgeting their monthly entitlement. The issuance of a crisis grant to a client who had received more than six grants in a twelve month period required the approval of the District Supervisor. Clients were informed of the Ministry's expectation that community resources, such as food banks and free food outlets were available to meet their immediate need and clients were required
to exhaust all available forms of support prior to a crisis grant being considered.

Community agencies were greatly impacted not only with the change to the Ministry's crisis grant policy, but also due to the three month residency requirement that was imposed in December of 1995. The new legislation stipulated that in order for an individual to be eligible for welfare benefits, he/she was required to reside in BC for three months prior to the date in which he/she applied for benefits. The policy affected those who moved to BC from another province as well as those arriving from other countries as refugees and landed immigrants. Although challenged by the Federal Government as a violation of the Canada Assistance Plan, the Province of British Columbia was able to enforce the residency requirement. Those who were found ineligible for welfare were referred to community agencies for their food and shelter needs. There were exceptions built into the legislation for families with children and for those who were joining immediate family members currently residing in the Province. Hardship assistance was issued to those who did not qualify under the three month residency requirement only in those cases where exceptional circumstances existed.

Welfare recipients were used in the power struggle between the Federal and Provincial governments' dispute over the reduction in CAP funding. The BC government claimed that the influx of people from other provinces, and the fact that BC was often a desired destination for refugee claimants, put a strain on the Province's welfare system. Their response to the growing number of people in need of welfare benefits was to impose a restriction on the amount of time a person was required to live in BC in order to be eligible for assistance. While the Federal and BC government debated over funding, many people

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8 In February 1997, the three month residency requirement was rescinded as the result of an agreement that was reached between the Federal and Provincial governments whereby the Federal/Provincial transfer payment schedule would be reinstated.

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who arrived in BC and did not meet the three month residency requirement were forced to rely on strained community resources for their food and shelter. It is unknown how many of those people ended up living on the streets. Despite the outcry from anti-poverty advocacy groups, the BC government held fast to its position and did not rescind the residency requirement until the Federal government agreed to reinstate the transfer payments. (Premier’s News Release, March 6, 1997) Those who suffered through the three month residency and eventually qualified for income assistance benefits were met with restrictive policies and meagre entitlements.

Following the changes made to the Ministry's policies regarding the types of benefits that could be issued and the imposed limitations of those benefits, came the reduction of the overall welfare benefit rates in January of 1996. The monthly support benefit for single employable clients decreased by $46 from $221 to $175. The rate decrease also impacted the issuance of hardship benefits, especially for single parents. Rather than the monthly support entitlement of $462 for a single parent with one child, the amount of hardship assistance issued was based on the unit size of the family.\(^9\) This resulted in a $99 per month decrease in the support allowance for single parents receiving hardship benefits.

The Government maintained that the reduction in benefits was needed to support the “back to work” programs that were being developed. “Youth Works” and “Welfare to Work” became the catch phrases of the government in early 1996 which was attempting to restore public confidence in a welfare system that was thought to be too easy for clients to qualify for and remain on.

\(^9\)Unit size refers to the number of family members on a single file. Childless couples receive a lower support portion than single parents with one dependent. The change in hardship rates resulted in single parent families receiving the lower entitlement based on the number of people in the unit rather than the additional support for the child(ren).
Family Bonus

The implementation of the Family Bonus program took place in July of 1996 and was developed in conjunction with the Federal Government and its distribution of benefits was linked to the Child Tax Benefit system. The program impacts two parent and single parent families in receipt of income assistance as well as low wage earning families throughout the Province. A family's eligibility for Family Bonus is based on their yearly net income as declared on their previous year's income tax return. The maximum benefit that a family can receive through the Family Bonus program is $104 per child per month which is issued in addition to the Child Tax Benefit. Families in receipt of income assistance have their monthly welfare cheque reduced by $103 per child which is subsequently replaced by the Family Bonus benefit. The Family Bonus program was presented as being an "attack on child poverty":

In July 1996, British Columbia became the first province to replace the existing welfare-based child benefits system with child benefits for all low-income families. This may be regarded as one of the most significant structural reforms to welfare in Canada since the consolidation of categorical programs following the introduction of the Canada Assistance Plan in 1966. The possibility of implementing a similar child benefits system for the whole country is now under discussion between the provinces and the federal government: BC's Family Bonus initiative can be instructive for Canada as it considers how to attack child poverty. (Mendelson, 1997: 2)

Although the program benefits working poor families through the issuance of monthly assistance, the Family Bonus program does not provide additional support to those receiving welfare benefits. In fact, families in receipt of income assistance are required to manage their monthly expenditures on the basis of funds coming from two distinct sources. If a family does not file their yearly income tax return, or is not eligible for the Federally issued Child Tax Credit, they will not receive the Family Bonus benefit. This results in families on income assistance receiving less than the maximum monthly entitlement they
had been receiving from the Provincial Income Assistance program. The implementation of the Family Bonus program does contain provisions to assist those families, in receipt of welfare benefits, who have not filed their income tax return and/or have not applied for the Child Tax Benefit. However, the temporary provisions are limited in that the additional $103 per child is issued for a maximum of four months. It is assumed that the Federal Government is able to process an individual's tax return and Child Tax benefit application and issue the Family Bonus benefit within the four month period. Family Bonus constitutes an additional benefit that families on the welfare system must apply for and an additional source of income that financial assistance workers are responsible for monitoring.

The “Back to Work” Initiatives

On November 1, 1994 the Government of British Columbia created the Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour as a means of centralizing all government funded education and training programs. Prior to the creation of the new Ministry, Rehabilitation Officers (ROs) were located within each district welfare office to address the needs of clients who were interested in schooling or re-training. The ROs worked closely with Financial Assistance Workers in the monitoring of clients who had been referred to specific programs. When the Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour was established, ROs were removed from the district welfare offices and their services to clients were conducted from a central area office. ROs became “Training Consultants” and with the change in title came increased caseloads. A single Training Consultant was responsible for providing services to client from as many as three welfare offices which resulted in communication problems between Training

10 The Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour has since been changed to the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training.
Consultants and Financial Assistance Workers and poor service delivery to clients seeking a way out of welfare. In addition to the above noted problems, the Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour was also ill-equipped to provide the expanded programs promised to welfare recipients. Training Consultants continued referring those clients they were able to interview to the same pre-employment programs that had been utilized prior to the inception of the new Ministry. A number of Training Consultants were responsible for establishing contracts with employers and other community programs which further limited their ability to interview and assess clients’ work-related needs.

In January of 1996 the Ministry of Social Services introduced “Youth Works” as part of the overhaul of the current welfare system. Youth Works, the Government claimed, was not welfare but rather it was a support program designed specifically for those between the ages of 19 and 24 who were in need of government aid. Youth Works contained a number of stipulations for the provision of services to those in the appropriate age category. A client in receipt of Youth Works was expected to conduct a self-directed job search for the first seven months of receiving benefits. In addition to the welfare rate reduction imposed in January of 1996, Youth Work policy eliminated the issuance of funds for transportation for those expected to look for work on a daily basis. The clients in receipt of Youth Works were also deemed ineligible, for the first seven months, to receive any assistance from the Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour. If after month seven the client had not found employment, he/she was then eligible to access job search programs. Job search programs, also known as “job clubs”, are structured to assist clients in constructing a resume, contacting potential employers and practising interviewing techniques. The duration of the job club is usually five weeks or less if the client is successful in finding employment. The client who is receiving “Youth Works” after month ten, due to not having
found a job, is then eligible to receive additional training in the form of basic education/upgrading and access to job readiness programs that are designed to address the client's underlying barriers to employment (i.e.: drug/alcohol addiction, emotional problems, etc.).

The Youth Works policy also stipulated that if there was a break in service, in that the client ceased to receive Youth Work benefits, he/she must begin the wait for employment finding services from the beginning, regardless of the amount of time he/she had been off the system. It is not uncommon that a client will inform his/her worker that the assistance is no longer needed as employment had been found, only to discover that the job offer has subsequently been withdrawn. In this instance, the client who reapplies for assistance must begin the seven month wait for education and training programs. This requirement was especially frustrating for those clients who are short-term habitual consumers of welfare due to their lack of education and/or work experience that inhibits them from obtaining and maintaining consistent employment.

In addition to Youth Works, the Ministry of Social Services also introduced “Welfare to Work” for those 25 years of age and older. Welfare to Work encompassed the same time specific requirements as Youth Works, with one exception. The government, in developing the two programs, focussed more specifically on the younger generation of welfare clients who possessed greater potential for finding employment and eventually becoming independent of government assistance. Clients receiving Youth Works were guaranteed access to training programs after month ten whereas those over 24 were eligible for programs on an “as available” basis only. Priority was given to those receiving Youth Works while the remaining client population was left to search for employment with limited funds and few resources.
Despite all of the recommendations made by the Advisory Council in 1994, the only ones to be realized were those that dealt with moving people off income assistance and into the workforce.

Unless the income security system is seen as an investment in the future of British Columbians, and as a means to create long-term economic and social prosperity, poverty and unemployment will continue to erode out society. We cannot afford reductions in social programs, such as employment and training programs, because reductions will only cost us more in lost human potential and increased welfare costs in the future. The government must recognize that 2/3 of the 300,000 people receiving income assistance are adults - a vast resource that is not being used to its full potential. Providing more and better employment and training opportunities can only have a positive influence on the social and economic well-being of the entire province. (Advisory Council, 1994: 12)

The government's approach in diverting welfare recipients into the workforce, however, was, in many cases, done in a forceful way. Recipients were denied benefits if they did not take part in the job training program to which they were referred despite the fact that many lacked the necessary tools (decent clothing, transportation, self-confidence) needed in order to be successful in their search for employment. As well, many of the employment programs were designed to filter welfare recipients into low-paying service sector jobs which fixated them in the "poverty loop".

The Impact

On Clients

The impact that the changes to the welfare system in British Columbia have had on welfare clients is evident in three primary areas. First, the changes have placed increased scrutiny and suspicion on the client's claim for welfare benefits. Clients are subjected to a number of pre-application screening processes as well as increased monitoring techniques once they are in receipt of benefits. Whereas the system previously operated, at least in
part, on the basis of trust, the new policies place a greater emphasis on the probability that the individual applying for and/or receiving benefits will attempt to provide false or misleading information in order to qualify for assistance. The new policies have also shifted the focus of the welfare system from one that was intended to alleviate poverty by providing for those in need, to one that is concerned primarily with its accountability to the tax paying population. It has been argued that the welfare system has always encompassed a certain degree of suspicion and distrust towards those collecting welfare benefits. (Gottlieb; 1974, Little; 1995, Burman; 1996) However, the implementation of policies and procedures designed specifically to target those who may be defrauding the welfare system has resulted in the entire client population being subjected to measures that place doubt on their need for assistance.

Secondly, the changes have resulted in both lower benefit rates and limitations of benefits previously in place. The Advisory Council's report in 1994 called for an overall increase in rates to meet the basic needs of individuals on income assistance. In 1994 the maximum monthly benefit rate for a single employable person was $546 per month ($221 for support and $325 for shelter) which, the Council argued, was insufficient due to the rising cost of living in British Columbia. The rate decrease in January of 1996 lowered the support portion of the monthly entitlement from $221 to $175. The lowering of the support rate made the entitlement less in real terms than that which was issued in the mid 1980's. The Government argued that the money saved through the rate decrease would be funnelled to programs designed to assist welfare clients back to work. However, the successes of the new "back to work" programs, especially for those clients in the "Welfare to Work" classification, have yet to materialize and many clients have simply been forced to survive on less than they had been receiving prior to January of 1996.
The rate decrease was also accompanied by limitations placed on policies geared to assist clients who were unable to manage their monthly entitlement and were in crisis. The Government deemed clients who needed extra funds for food, clothing, etc. to be unable to manage their funds and therefore subject to the administration of their benefits. Although the administration of benefits was presented as a means of assisting clients in managing their funds, it was experienced as a punitive measure for those who could not survive on the minimal monthly allowance.

Finally, the new policies and procedures have resulted in longer waiting periods for those initially applying for benefits. “Same-day service” has become “same-week service” with many clients having to wait between two and seven working days for an eligibility decision to be made. The waiting period further exacerbates the desperate situation for those applicants who have waited until they have no other recourse but to apply for welfare. The waiting period was due to the increased scrutiny placed on the client’s claim for benefits as all of the relevant information provided by the applicant must be reviewed and verified. Those applicants who are unable to provide the required information or whose information contains discrepancies are often required to wait for a longer period of time.

Furthermore, with the limitations placed on eligibility criteria, some applicants after having waited for a decision to be made, find that they are not eligible for benefits. For those who saw the welfare office as their last means of support, the denial of benefits can be both unexpected and devastating.

On Front-line Workers

The impact that the changes to the welfare system have had on clients carried over to those who do the work of welfare. Workers are responsible for explaining to clients what
changes have occurred but they are also required to implement those changes that often have severe consequences for those with whom they are interacting. Incidents of workplace violence and abuse are becoming more prevalent in welfare offices across BC as the client population is forced to abide by stricter rules and survive on fewer benefits. The face to face interactions that workers engage in with their clients leaves the worker vulnerable to the frustration and hostility felt by the client population. Not only do workers experience the anger expressed by clients, but they are also faced with clients who are emotionally distraught. Cries of “why are you doing this to me” and “what am I supposed to do now?” that are directed at workers are becoming commonplace. The range of emotions displayed by clients that workers deal with on a day to day basis compounds the dilemma they are in having to deliver services to the poor that are based on restrictive and punitive policies. The limitations inherent in the new policies have made the work of front-line staff less “people focussed” as workers often must deny benefits to clients who they feel are truly in need.

Prior to the implementation of the new policies, workers were able to exercise a greater degree of discretion in determining a client’s eligibility for benefits. The “grey” areas of policy allowed workers to be creative when interpreting the intent of a particular section of the regulations and provided the worker with more flexibility in assisting clients whose requests for assistance did not meet eligibility requirements. The narrowing of the rules surrounding a client’s eligibility for benefits, that is inherent in the new policies, limited the worker’s ability to use discretion in the performance of his/her work. The work performed by Financial Assistance Workers has been transformed from that which was primarily “client-centered” to a more rule-bound “system-centered” mode of providing service. Front-line workers have been made accountable to the system and the cost-saving measures
imposed by the Government and less accountable to the needs of the client and, it is likely that the changes made to the welfare system and the shift in the focus of the work performed by workers, has contributed to a decrease in job satisfaction.

In addition to workers having to confront an increasingly desperate client population coupled with limits that have been placed on their ability to meet clients' needs, workers have also experienced an increase in work load as a result of the welfare system changes. Repayment agreements, which accompany benefit payments made under the hardship section of policy, not only entail an increase in paper work but they are time-consuming as the worker must explain the ramifications of the agreement to the client. In addition to repayment agreements, hardship benefits issued to clients awaiting UIC are made so on an assignment basis. In the fall of 1994 the Provincial Government entered into an agreement with the Federal Government' s UIC program which allowed for the recapture of welfare benefits from initial UIC payments. The repayments and assignments, that accompany hardship payments and other assignable benefits, have created additional paper work for front-line staff and have decreased the amount of time the worker has available to discuss other issues that the client may bring to the interview.

An increase in work load also resulted from the implementation of the “Youth Works” program. Financial Assistance Workers are required to monitor those clients between the ages of 19 and 24 to ensure that they are complying with the intensive seven month job search. The worker is required to request documentation from the client (i.e. job search lists, employer contacts) as proof that the client is adhering to the expectations of the policy. Workers are also required to refer clients to the Training Consultants and monitor their progress in pre-employment programs. The Government’s expressed intent of the Youth Works program was to move those under 24 years of age off of the welfare system and into
the workforce. The Financial Assistance Worker plays a major role in the success of the program as it is the worker who is responsible for identifying, referring and monitoring those clients in the target population.

An increasingly frustrated client population, the limits placed on the use of worker discretion, and an increase in workload have had a major impact on the way in which work is now conducted by front-line workers in the Ministry of Social Services. Policy and procedural changes have made it difficult for workers to provide service to those in need of government assistance. They are often required to police those who come to the welfare office seeking help, more so now than in the past. The contradictory roles that workers assume in their daily interactions with clients is a reflection of the changing nature of the welfare system. Although workers are viewed, by themselves and their clients, as being responsible for helping those in need, but they are also required to abide by the policies set forth by the government. The Financial Assistance Worker, in the performance of his/her job and the application of policy, assumes various roles - from “helper” to “welfare cop” as he/she is required both to assist clients and yet apply measures that reinforce their impoverishment and control their lives. These conflicting roles, evidenced more so now than ever as a result of the changes to welfare policy, greatly impacts the front-line workers’ ability to assist the poor and creates a work environment that pits those in need against those who work on welfare’s front line.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified the major changes that the welfare system in British Columbia has undergone in the last five years. The integrity of the income assistance program came under criticism as a result of the widespread media coverage of welfare
fraud that commenced in 1993. The Government responded to the vocal criticism by implementing policies and procedures that made welfare, for those in need, more difficult to obtain and remain on. Applicants are required to submit detailed financial and personal information, to substantiate their need for assistance, which is subject to a verification process. In addition, clients receiving welfare benefits are not only forced to subsist on a lower monthly allowance, but they are also subject to frequent eligibility reviews to ensure that they are abiding by the rules set forth in the welfare regulations. The combined effect of the welfare reform has been witnessed in an increasingly desperate client population and a transformation in the way in which front line welfare workers perform their jobs.

Chapter three will explore the BC Government's response to the media reports concerning welfare fraud in 1993 and 1994. The analysis will be presented by drawing upon themes found within moral panic and social constructionist theories and will identify the process through which the welfare fraud "problem" became the defining feature around which the welfare reform was centered. It is important to understand the impact that the media had on fuelling the public outcry to deal with the constructed "deviant" client population. The control measures that have been implemented in the welfare bureaucracy to combat this "deviant" group have been justified, to a large extent, by the way in which the welfare client was characterized by the media. The chapter will also address the moral regulation of welfare clients, rooted in English Poor Law, which continues to shape society's perception of welfare and those who receive it. It is the long standing societal disregard for the poor that rendered them an easy target for a government under considerable public pressure to address the welfare "problem".
This chapter will situate the recent welfare reform within the realm of contemporary social problems. The moral panic that was generated by media reports did not happen randomly. Rather it must be located within the particular social context out of which the problem was constructed. The moral regulation of the poor, throughout history, must also be addressed in the analysis of this particular moral panic because this ideology is used to shape society's understanding of who is "worthy" of government assistance and who is not. In this chapter I incorporate themes found within both moral panic theory and social constructionism in my discussion concerning why the recent welfare reform took the particular shape that it did and how the media was able to single out certain segments of the welfare population and create a renewed sense of public indignation toward these subgroups of welfare recipients. The moral panic approach focuses primarily on the objective conditions out of which problems arise and whereas the social constructionism perspective deals more with the subjective elements that perpetuate the creation of social problems. There is a heavy overlap, however, between the moral panics and social problems. Both are generated by a specific definition of this situation; with both, steps are taken to eliminate those conditions that have been regarded as undesirable; both entail "claims-making" about a condition; and with both, the concern does not necessarily encompass all or most members or all or most segments of a given population. (Goode, Ben-Yehuda, 1994:103)

Neither approach in its own right is sufficient in shaping an understanding of the
"problems" that have been created with regards to the welfare system. Unlike other social problems, those that have been attributed to welfare, and more specifically welfare recipients, can be linked to the processes involved in the continual and relentless moralizing of the welfare population and the racist and sexist ideologies that permeate much of society's attitude toward this particular population. The stigmatization that is associated with poverty and the state's control over the lives of welfare recipients also renders the poor an easy target for the imposition of regulatory tactics in response to the deviant label to which they have been assigned. The involvement of the media in this process, as well, cannot be overstated. The reports that dominated the media coverage of the welfare problem in 1993 and 1994, perpetuated the myths that surround welfare recipients and, in many respects, they were dependent on these myths to appeal to the public's interest. The welfare problem was "made to mean" by the media because within this society, the dominant ideology that is incorporated into the production of 'news' virtually guarantees that any discussions with regards to the poor will take place in absence of the social content within which poverty is perpetuated. The poor, as a result, continue to be held responsible for their impoverishment and exist as objects of moral indignation.

Setting the Stage

In late 1991 the New Democrat Party became the governing political body in BC which resulted in the restructuring of the conservative political ideology around which the BC government had been shaped. Joan Smallwood, a former social worker and known community activist, was appointed Minister of Social Services under the NDP and her approach to the delivery of welfare services was one based on strengthening the social safety net and 'loosening up' the restrictive welfare policies previously in place. This,
along with the NDP's overall philosophy which emphasized social democratic principles and a professed 'sensitivity' to the poor, made them a target for critics who embraced the firmly embedded neo-conservative values and the belief that the welfare system and, more specifically, welfare recipients, needed to be regulated.

The welfare system in British Columbia in the early 1990's was also impacted by the federal government's reduction in CAP funding which placed increasing demands on the province's tax base to support those in need of welfare benefits. The economic recession that lasted throughout much of the 1980's and the job losses associated with the free trade agreement and the emergence of the "high tech" work place resulted in rising unemployment rates and an increased dependence on provincial welfare programs for those who had been detached from, or forced out of, the labour market. The welfare system in BC absorbed much of the unemployment generated at the federal level as rising numbers of people began arriving in the province in search of work. Despite the fact that BC maintained one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country, employment opportunities for these new comers were often unrealized.

The growing tax burden associated with welfare system funding in BC began making headlines in local news reports in early 1993 and, rather than examining the impact of the fiscal restraint at the federal level, the ramifications of the free trade agreement and a long standing economic recession, the media focussed on the NDP government's lax approach in the management of the income assistance program.¹

The position that the media took in their reporting of these events was situated within the conservative ideological framework of the political opposition. The welfare problem

¹"Welfare close to collapse, minister says". (Vancouver Sun. March 10, 1993:A1)
"Real changes needed in welfare system." (Vancouver Sun. March 11, 1993:A3)
"Smallwood deserves sack for runaway welfare costs." (Vancouver Sun. March 15, 1993:A3)
was structured according to the neo-conservative discourse used in the media reports and this not only firmly embedded the position from which the problem was to be understood but it also forced future discussions of the welfare system to take place within the ideological framework that had been established. (Hall, 1978:58) As the “primary definers” in the media reports, the right wing opponents of the NDP and those who maintained that fiscal restraint was needed to curb escalating welfare system costs, forced any arguments that challenged the primary interpretation to begin from a disadvantaged position. This ensured those alternative perspectives that attempted to address the underlying social content of the welfare problem, namely the structural forces that perpetuate unemployment and poverty, were downplayed or simply ignored.

Hall (1978) suggests that the influence that right wing “spokespersons” have on shaping the media’s presentation of social issues can be understood in terms of the structured relationship that exists between the media and those in positions of power.

These two aspects of news production - the practical pressures of constantly working against the clock and the professional demands of impartiality and objectivity - combine to produce a systematically structured *over-accessing* to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions. ...The result of this structured preference given in the media to the opinions of the powerful is that these ‘spokesmen’ become what we call the *primary definers* of topics. (58)

“Privileged access” to the media ensures that the dominant ideology will be upheld and that the meaning attributed to a certain issue will reflect the opinions, and reproduce the definitions, of the powerful. (Hall, 1978:57) It is also worth noting that the newspaper media in British Columbia, namely the *Vancouver Sun* and *The Province*, fall under the ownership of the same corporation. Pacific Press is a division of Southam Incorporated which produces these two newspapers and the concentration of media control and ownership had
a significant influence on the way in which the welfare fraud problem was presented. Fishman (1981) suggests:

News...is manufactured by journalists through interpreting and selecting events to fit pre-existing categories, themselves a product of the bureaucratic exigencies of news organizations and the particular concentration of media control and ownership. (159)

In May of 1993, the media shifted its attention from the overall burgeoning costs associated with the welfare system in BC to reports of widespread fraud and abuse that was allegedly taking place within the system. The media stories which were sparked by a leaked report of an internal investigation that had been conducted by the Ministry of Social Services into incidences of fraudulent welfare activity were used to legitimate the concerns that had been raised with regards to the NDP’s failure to effectively manage the welfare system. One news report read:

“Public mislead, intentionally or not”

Last week I put a question to Andy Orr, press secretary to Premier Harcourt, I had heard that the government commissioned a report on welfare abuse. But the ministry of social services was sitting on the report, because it didn’t like the conclusion. Was this true?

2"Special investigations unit set up to fight welfare fraud - Joan Smallwood says abuses under control" (Vancouver Sun. May 7, 1993: A3)
"We're not doing a good enough job, says minister promising tougher line on welfare. (Vancouver Sun. May 13, 1993: A1)
"The NDP: strike one" (Vancouver Sun. May 13, 1993: A5)
"Minister demands her staff explain why she wasn't alerted to abuses report - Joan Smallwood: not a happy camper". (Vancouver Sun. May 13, 1993: A2)
"At last, the minister gets the message" (Vancouver Sun. May 13, 1993: A12)
"Fraud may net $100M a year". (Province. May 13, 1993:A1)
"Heat's on welfare minister - Opposition hounds her, Harcourt defends her" (Province. May 14, 1993: A5)
"Listen to those on welfare's front lines". (Vancouver Sun. May 14, 1993:A16)
"We're Suckers! - Conman cheated system for $25,000 and now collects welfare in jail". (Province. May 14, 1993: A1)
"NDP rejects call for probe and resignation". (Vancouver Sun. May 14, 1993:B2)
"Defiant Smallwood left with eggy face". (Surrey/North Delta Now. May 15, 1993: A8)
"A BC ministry's mother lode of misery". (Province. May 16, 1993: A6)
"Opposition calling for welfare probe“ (Vancouver Sun. May 25, 1993: B5)
While the premier's office was checking, *The Sun* put the same query went out to the finance ministry. Again the word came back: no such report existed. "We wish it did," said the fellow from finance, meaning, I guess, that such a report might provide the "ammunition" in the battle to contain the welfare budget.

She (Joan Smallwood) was on the record as saying "administrative error and fraud at most accounted for one percent of welfare payments." Yes, she admitted, it (the report) did exist. It was commissioned by her ministry last fall in response to criticisms from the auditor-general. But in the current stage, the report was merely a "draft". The contents were "speculative" and "incomplete". She had asked her staff to prepare a more suitable version. *(Vancouver Sun, May 12, 1993: A12)*

The ministry report that was leaked to the media and the firestorm of accusations waged at the Minister of Social Services as a result, marked a crucial turn to the way in which the NDP government responded to the emerging welfare crisis. The government, in an attempt to diffuse escalating public criticism and perform some measure of damage control, was forced to position itself within the ideological boundaries of the right wing opposition. As a result, the NDP government and the "accredited sources" therein occupied a place amongst the "primary definers" in the media reports concerning alleged welfare fraud and abuse. This shift had serious implications for welfare recipients for they became the targets in the government's mission to "clean up" the welfare system.

**From Moral Regulation to Moral Panics**

The media's presentation of alleged welfare fraud and abuse generated public concern by emphasizing only those aspects of the problem which corresponded to the existing belief system that surrounds welfare and those who receive it. Inherent in these reports were generalizations and misconceptions in regards to both the number of individuals taking part in overt fraudulent activity and the losses incurred by the government as a result. Filtered into the media coverage of welfare fraud, as well, were stories that
focussed on the “deadbeat” segment of the welfare population who was accused of “taking advantage” of the welfare system by not making efforts to find work. The characterization of welfare recipients as “scammers” and “deadbeats” that dominated the media’s presentation is firmly embedded in the social consciousness and are used to inform the majority of government welfare policies.

This type of moralizing that surrounds the behaviour of welfare recipients can be linked to the moral categorization of the poor that was inherent in the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601. The poor law, which combined humanitarianism with the Protestant ethic, differentiated between those who were deemed to be “fit for work” and those who were excused from having to seek work due to a physical or mental disability or old age. (Zastrow, 1990:79) The able-bodied poor were offered work and, if they refused, they were punished or imprisoned. The elderly and disabled, on the other hand, were either given public relief or placed in poor houses.

The distinctions that were made between the “deserving” and “undeserving”, evidenced in the poor law, continues to shape the state’s approach to the delivery of welfare services. However, the moral categorization of welfare recipients that takes place in contemporary society is informed not only by the public’s perceived perception of their malfunctioning, personal inadequacies or ill-advised activities. Moral categorization also incorporates a hierarchal ordering based on race and gender stereotypes from which the “worthiness” of certain ethnic minorities and women are measured. As a result, these two groups are also subject to moral scrutiny when their claims for government assistance are made. The media played upon the normative concerns of the public in the creation of the moral panic surrounding welfare fraud by targeting certain groups who occupied a place amongst the most “unworthy”. The “able-bodied”, “outsiders” and single mothers were
defined through news reports as the quintessential elements in the welfare fraud "problem".

The Media Inventory

The “Able-bodied”

One of the tactics used by the media to make sense of their claim that the welfare system was being undermined, was to highlight reports that focussed on “able-bodied” recipients who were engaged in visible acts of civil disobedience. In late 1993 the Clayoquot Sound logging protests were taking place and it was alleged that many of those on the front-line of the protest were collecting welfare benefits. The structuring of this report around those who were employed (and prevented from working) and those who were unemployed (and “unwilling” to work) not only served to ignite public speculation with regards to the legitimacy of welfare recipients “right” to protest but it also pitted these two groups against each other and, in doing so, diverted the conflict surrounding the logging protest from one between workers and protesters to one between the “deserving” and the “undeserving”. Hall (1978) suggests:

The media define for the majority of the population what significant events are taking place, but, also, they offer powerful interpretations of how to understand these events. Implicit in those interpretations are orientations towards the events and the people or groups involved in them. (57)

The media provided an interpretation of the Clayoquot protest that undermined the moral integrity and “right to protest” of the people allegedly collecting welfare benefits by orientating the event according to the dominant ideology that respects those who work and rejects those that do not. Cohen (1980) suggests that once a person is type case as a

"Welfare cheque’s off". (The Province. November 19, 1993:A34)
"deviant" his acts will be interpreted in terms of the status to which he has been assigned. The media reports that targeted these protesters clearly played upon their status within the realm of welfare "deviants" to attribute meaning to this particular event and fuel the emerging moral panic.

Other media reports that targeted "able-bodied" welfare recipients focussed more specifically on the stereotypical behaviour that has been attributed to this particular group. Comments made by Premier Harcourt were featured in these reports. One read:

"Where there is work and where there are training programs, people who are able to work who don't take those training programs, who are taking advantage of the good will of British Columbians, who refuse to get back into the work-force - those people will be cut off welfare," Harcourt said. (Vancouver Sun, September 22, 1993:A1)

This report targets in a very overt way those welfare recipients whom society believes are "lazy" and "unwilling" to engage themselves in employment.

The mass media, particularly newspapers, by dint of their methods of selecting and presenting news relevant to welfare, promote the view that those receiving welfare benefits are scroungers. This re-enforces anti-welfare tendencies in some areas of public opinion. (Howitt, 1982:170)

What this report, and the others like it, do not address however, are the structural forces that prevent the majority of welfare recipients from entering the labour market. At the same time that "able-bodied" welfare recipients are being threatened with having their benefits terminated, they are being constrained by a welfare system that fosters dependency by slowing eating away at their self confidence and self worth. As well, for a welfare recipient to attempt to challenge this generalization made by the media would mean entering into a debate structured around neo-conservative ideology that minimizes the effects that the
state has in creating and maintaining unemployment. The government creates unemployment and then expects those most widely affected; the able-bodied, to find solutions around it while at the same time they are expected to avoid, at all costs, the need for welfare assistance.

Media reports also capitalized on the public's moral indignation and fears surrounding other "deviant" activity.\(^5\) Stories that highlighted the use of fraudulently obtained welfare monies to support the illegal drug trade and other related addictions, namely alcoholism, not only situated welfare recipients amongst known "deviants" but they also helped to perpetuate myths that associate addictions and violence with poverty. Wall (1993) suggests that:

\[\text{The particular circumstances of being poor are rarely cited as reasons for violence in poor communities. Instead, middle-class mythology maintains that the violence is part and parcel of the "makeup" of people who are poor and is therefore to be expected. In addition, the manifestation of violence in low-income communities is highly visible. (253)}\]

A lot of the moralizing that goes on with respect to welfare recipients is centered around myths that link poverty to the abuse of alcohol and the use of illicit drugs. The notion of the "welfare bum" is a well known stereotype used to refer to those who are at the bottom of the welfare pool. The "welfare bum" mythology conjures up images associated with the most visible segment of the welfare population. Their actions are used to define much of what we know about welfare recipients and forms the basis for much of the myth-making associated with the poor. The media constructed the welfare problem in part, by incorporating the visible aspects of certain segments of the welfare population to substantiate its claim that other forms of deviant behaviour were inextricably linked to the

\(^5\)"Canadians fed up with people who get welfare". (Vancouver Sun. March 29, 1993:A1)
"Welfare cheat jailed". (Province. March 30, 1994:B8)
"Fraud suspect on loose" (Province. October 20, 1994:A5)
escalating fraud and abuse allegedly taking place within the welfare system.

The “ Outsiders”

Another way in which the media elevated public concern regarding the welfare system was through reports that focussed on the impact that “non-residents” moving to British Columbia were having on the province’s welfare system. These reports not only emphasized the influx of people coming to BC from other provinces but also the increased welfare fraud that was allegedly occurring as a result. A prediction theme of the media inventory of welfare fraud was evident in these reports. Cohen (1980) suggests that a “prophecy of doom” ideology is generated by media reports that magnify the deviance taking place but that also portray the likelihood that the deviant behaviour will recur and eventually get worse. The media, by situating elements of the welfare fraud problem within this context, created an atmosphere that intensified public concern about the alleged problem and a growing antagonism towards these “outsiders”. In the process through which welfare recipients are judged to be either “deserving” or “undeserving” of government aid, factors associated with their citizenship status within a particular society or community are used to inform this designation. The individuals who recently moved to BC and were in need of, or collecting, welfare benefits therefore were evaluated according to this criteria and were relegated to the ranks of the “undeserving” as a result.

Media reports that focussed on welfare fraud and abuse being committed by

6“Influx to B.C. strains welfare.” (Globe and Mail, June 3, 1993:A1)
“Welfare rolls in B.C. hit by surge of newcomers.” (Globe and Mail, June 3, 1993:A2)

7“Hundreds double up on Alberta, B.C. welfare.” (Vancouver Sun, August 31, 1993:A1)
“Privacy a concern as B.C., Alberta prepare to swap information on welfare cheats.” (Vancouver Sun, November 5, 1993:B5)
“B.C., Alberta cut off welfare double-dippers.” (Province, August 31, 1994:A4)
“B.C., Sask. nail double-dippers.” (Province, October 20, 1994:A5)
“outsiders” also targeted certain ethnic minorities. Racist ideology permeated these reports in both direct and indirect ways. One report in particular was headlined with a comment made by an immigration official who had referred to an Iranian man accused of welfare fraud as a “parasite.” (Vancouver Sun. December 14, 1993:A5). Other reports targeted more specifically members of the Somalian community who were allegedly engaged in the commission of widespread welfare fraud to support the efforts of known warlords in their home country. Refugees from third world countries were particularly susceptible to being targeted by the media to further its claim that the welfare system was being undermined by “outsiders”. Refugees occupy a place amongst those deemed “unworthy” of government aid because our society, as currently structured, does not recognize these individuals as having the “right” to participate as full members of this society. The dominant ideology and the racism inherent in it identifies this segment of the population as having contributed little if anything to the economy. Therefore their requests for government assistance are often met with public resentment. The correlation that was made between refugees and welfare fraud, through these media reports, invented a “reality” which was used by both welfare and immigration officials to justify the enhancement of control measures to regulate refugees from third world countries.

The Single mothers

The media also produced reports that situated single mothers within the realm of

8"Ex-political refugee called ‘parasite’". (Vancouver Sun. December 14, 1993:A5)
"Zero tolerance' for refugee cheats". (Vancouver Sun. March 5, 1994:A3)

"Bogus Somali passports scheme feared on its way from Toronto". (Vancouver Sun. October 18, 1995:B6)
welfare “deviants”. These stories focussed on the common law status of single welfare mothers who were accused of collecting welfare benefits while being supported by a male partner and allegedly failing to report such living arrangements to the welfare authorities.\textsuperscript{10}

An excerpt from one of these reports read:

“...A mother collects welfare for herself and her kids but doesn’t let on she has a boyfriend or a common-law husband supporting the family. It’s the most common type of welfare fraud and one of the easiest to perpetrate. Home visits, to verify address and to check who’s living there, are the most effective ways of detecting this form of fraud. If mom’s got a man living there, an undeclared boarder or fewer kids than she’s claimed, she’s unlikely to answer the door to strangers. Said one former fraud investigator: “You wouldn’t believe the excuses: ‘Yes, he’s working, but he comes and goes’ or ‘But I have to remain independent.’” Meanwhile, legitimate and honest families on welfare barely make it to the end of the month and many turn to food banks in desperation.” (Province. June 18, 1995:A1)

The intense moral scrutiny to which single mothers are subjected in both the administration of welfare policy and public opinion was clearly laid out in these media reports and was also informed by the hierarchy of worthiness from which single mothers are measured. This hierarchy is constructed around the circumstances that are believed to have led to a mother’s single status. (Little, 1994:236) At the top are widowed mothers who are deemed to be “deserving” of government assistance because they are viewed as not having played a direct part in their designation to single motherhood. However, the rest of single mothers; divorced, abandoned, and unwed, are morally and financially scrutinized and, as a result, “experience more intensive investigations to prove their worthiness”. (Little, 1994:241)

The investigations into the living arrangements of single mothers are not limited to

\textsuperscript{10}“Fraud may net $100M a year”. (Province. May 13, 1993:A1)
“The commonest scam” (Province. June 18, 1995)
welfare officials but are routinely conducted by neighbours, friends, family members and landlords who believe it is their duty to report this type of "fraudulent", hence "deviant" behaviour. It is not surprising then that the media was able to insert this segment of the welfare population into the welfare fraud equation.

Burman (1990) suggests that social patriarchy which stigmatizes and discriminates against single mothers, is also responsible for creating a relationship between single mothers and the state. He suggests that "it is as though subsidized members of the single mother enclave are virtually married to the government - and no rival supporter will be countenanced". (1990:103) The ideology that surrounds this notion of the "jealous state" namely that single welfare mothers are the property of the state, is disempowering and contributes to their positioning as "legitimate" objects of economic and sexual control by the welfare system. Despite the fact that historically the welfare system in BC has been relatively progressive in its treatment of single mothers, they continue to be singled out when problems in the welfare system are created.11

From Moral Panics to Public Problems

A moral panic surrounding welfare fraud and abuse was created by the media through reports that targeted particular segments of the welfare population and attributed the causes of the "problem" to members belonging to these groups. In order to make sense of their claims, the media relied on pre-existing stereotypes to appeal to the public's perceived understanding of who it is that collects welfare and what segments of the welfare population would be most likely to engage in "deviant" activities. The moralising that goes

11See Margaret Little's (1995) "Claiming a Unique Place - The Introduction of Mothers' Pensions in B.C." for a discussion of the influences that women's groups had in shaping the British Columbian government's treatment of single mothers with regards to the provision of financial assistance.
on in relation to welfare recipients was capitalized on by the media to thrust the problem of welfare fraud into the arena of public indignation thereby creating an atmosphere in which the imposition of regulatory measures geared to reduce the number of people collecting benefits could be legitimated. The selection and production of news, as has been mentioned, is inextricably linked to serving the interests of those in positions of power. Therefore, to understand the issue of welfare fraud as a by-product of a much larger right-wing agenda to reduce the number of people collecting welfare benefits is to understand the function of this moral panic. Reducing welfare system costs, as opposed to welfare fraud, was the real issue.

Situating the welfare fraud problem within the realm of moral panics illustrates the power that the media has in creating, and in this instance, recreating and perpetuating a "deviant" status that has been assigned to a particular segment of a given population. By creating an impression that those receiving welfare assistance were no-good idlers and cheats, the entire welfare system was effectively undermined. (Howitt, 1982:175) This discussion of the welfare fraud "problem" however, can be expanded by examining how the problem was "managed" and "controlled", who claimed "ownership" over it and who was assigned the responsibility for implementing solutions.

Ownership and Responsibility

Spector and Kituse (1977) locate the creation of a social problem in the activity involved in the process of defining a social condition. They write:

A central task of a theory of social problems and deviance is to describe and explain the definitional process in which morally objectionable conditions or behaviours are asserted to exist and the collective activities that become organized around those assertions. (1977:72)
The construction of social problems, in this sense, is a process that includes both ideological and structural elements. Spector and Kituse (1977) suggest that the ideological element of a social problem is found in the language and rhetoric used to describe the particular issue. Words imbue social conditions with meaning and help shape “popular conceptions of social conditions”. (1977:8). The way in which a social condition is formally presented, discussed and debated not only elicits the public’s attention but it also constructs the framework in which the social condition will be analysed. This process also establishes the language that will be used to describe the perceived problem. The structural element in the construction of a social problem refers to the action that is taken by institutions in response to the identified social condition.

When governmental agencies or other official and influential institutions to which claims might be put respond to the complaints of some group, the social problem activity undergoes a considerable transformation. This transformation begins when the agencies start to recognize a group and respond to its complaints. (Spector, Kituse, 1977:148)

Gusfield (1981), on the other hand, distinguishes between social problems and public problems by asserting that “all situations that are experienced by people as painful do not become matters of public activity and targets for public action”. (3) The issue of “ownership”, Gusfield suggests, is vital to understanding how a public problem takes form and subsequently who is assigned the task of addressing the problem. The ownership of a public problem is determined by a group’s “influence and authority to define the reality of the problem” and their ability to “regulate, control and innovate solutions”. (Gusfield, 1981:8-9)

Gusfield (1981) also suggests that with any given public problem there exists a multiplicity of solutions. The way in which solutions are arrived at depends on what group
or agency has been deemed responsible to attacking the problem. The structure of public problems is made up of "ownership", "casual responsibility", and "political responsibility" with the latter involving assertions about the sequence of events that account for the existence of the problem and statements that "somebody or some office is obligated to do something about the problem". (Gusfield, 1981:13) The concept of "ownership of public problems", also recognizes that power, influence, and authority are not equally distributed amongst groups making claims and shaping public opinion. (8). He writes:

Ownership constitutes one piece of the structure of public problems. It indicates the power to define and describe the problem. It tells us who but not what. It does not specify the content of description and solution. (Gusfield, 1981:13)

The emergence of the welfare fraud problem can be understood in relation to those who claim ownership over the problem of poverty. Anti-poverty groups in British Columbia have long played a part in defining issues of poverty around the government's lack of sufficient financial assistance for those on welfare and for structuring the economy to serve the needs of the rich and powerful.¹² The claims that these groups make, situate the problem of poverty in the government's overall failure in eradicating those elements of the economy that foster and perpetuate unemployment and poverty. Corporations have also been held responsible by these groups for keeping certain segments of the population poor through their influence in shaping economic policies that raise profit margins and maintain a supply of cheap labour. One poverty group claimed:

Poor people are often blamed for poverty. But are they really at fault? Poverty happens when people can't get jobs, when the jobs they do get have low wages or too few hours to support them adequately, or when social programs in place for people who can't work or find jobs are inadequate.

¹²The anti-poverty groups to which I am referring are End Legislated Poverty, The Downtown Eastside Resident's Association, and BC Coalition for People with Disabilities. These groups are the most active in the community and have been vocal in their criticism of the government's welfare reform.
In Canada, lately, high interest rates supported by the Bank of Canada, make it harder for working people to borrow money for houses, cars, and other consumer items. This means that the people who build these things get layed off. Free trade has made it profitable for corporations to move to Mexico and the US and take advantage of lower wages. Social programs like welfare have been cut back because governments have slashed them, blaming them for the deficit. In fact, however, the deficit is caused by high unemployment, low taxes on corporations and the rich, and high interest rates.

Who controls these forces that cause poverty? Mostly it's corporations and governments, not poor people. (The Long Haul. End Legislated Poverty, February, 1995)

The ownership of the problem of poverty that anti-poverty activists maintain and the obligations they place on the government to “fix” the problem illustrates how these groups have been able to insert a particular definition of poverty into the social consciousness. This fixation of political responsibility, in regards to the problem of poverty, however, was counteracted. Gusfield (1981) suggests that the “structure of public problems” is not immune to conflict. In fact, public problems are often structured around struggles between sets of groups over ownership and disownership and the fixation of responsibility. (15)

The problem of poverty, over which anti-poverty groups claim ownership, was challenged by assertions made by right-wing groups that it was the welfare recipient, and more specifically, certain segments of the welfare population that were responsible for undermining the welfare system and necessitating the need for a roll back in benefits and services. The definitional process, through which these groups situated the problem of poverty, played upon certain myths associated with welfare recipients to assert their claim and fixate political responsibility. The ownership of the welfare fraud problem by right wing

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13 A report produced by the Fraser Institute in March of 1995 claimed that there was between a nine and 15 per cent fraud rate in the Ministry of Social Services in 1994. It read “A high level of reported fraud is usually indicative of an active fraud detection and prevention system, and a low level of reported fraud often demonstrates nothing more than a state of blissful ignorance”. This report was used to substantiate claims made by the political opposition that welfare fraud was a serious problem within the Ministry.
opponents not only served to define "poverty" as being primarily the fault of the individual but it also defined welfare fraud as being the fault of the NDP government.

The NDP government responded to the welfare fraud problem and their assigned obligation to "fix it" by taking ownership of the problem. This resulted in the government being able to make claims about the problem, the causes of the problem, and what might be possible solutions to the problem. The government's ownership of the welfare fraud problem not only effectively diffused criticisms waged by the political opposition but it also served to legitimate the introduction of enhanced control measures within the welfare system. As well, the anti-poverty activist's claims with respect to the causes of poverty and the government's assigned responsibility to do something about it, were effectively overshadowed. Gusfield (1981) suggests:

The unique position of the state makes it a key figure in fixing responsibility. In some historical periods and for some issues it may be a processing machine, taking in inputs in the form of demands and processing them into policies that meet the demands, serving as a broker of inconsistent and equally powerful demands. Today the state appears more often as an active agent, the owner of problems it seeks to solve. Governmental officials and agencies operate to define public issues, develop and organize demands upon themselves, and control and move public attitudes and expectations. (15)

The government's ownership of the welfare fraud problem, and the subsequent cutbacks to welfare system benefits and programs that were witnessed through the welfare reform, illustrates the processes through which this problem was defined, managed, and eventually controlled. Although, as Gusfield (1981) suggests, for every public problem there is a multitude of solutions, problems that are created in the welfare system invariably lead to the implementation of restrictive and regulatory measures of which welfare recipients bear the brunt. The structural forces that keep some members of our society poor and the "poor bashing" ideology that prevails are enabling factors that make the
welfare system an easy target in the creation of public problems.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented an analysis of the welfare fraud problem and the structural and ideological factors that fuelled its emergence. The welfare fraud problem can be seen as having arisen out of two primary processes. First, the moralizing of the poor that takes place in our society made them an easy target for the media who are structurally bound to reproducing the opinions of those in positions of power. The dominant ideology that was reflected through the media reports concerning welfare fraud and abuse served to undermine both the integrity of welfare recipients and the management of the welfare system. The media worked in and through firmly embedded myths that characterize welfare recipients as having the propensity to engage in dishonest tactics to obtain government benefits. The process through which certain segments of the welfare population were used to illustrate the media’s claim was dependent on emphasizing the “undeserving” designation to which the able-bodied, outsiders and single mothers have been relegated.

Secondly, the struggle between groups over defining the causes of poverty and fixating responsibility also played a part in creating the welfare fraud problem. Anti-poverty groups’ claims that poverty was directly linked to decisions made by the state were effectively undermined by the assertions of right wing groups that welfare fraud, not poverty, was the real concern. The NDP government’s position in shaping and responding to the welfare fraud “crisis” reflected the interests of those right wing groups as they eventually took “ownership” of the problem of welfare fraud that had been created. The result was the implementation of the welfare reform through which limited benefits to the poor and enhanced surveillance and regulatory measures were accomplished.
These two processes illustrate how the welfare fraud problem was created and how welfare recipients were treated as a result. However, this analysis tells us little about the effects that the welfare fraud problem had on those who work on the front-lines of the welfare system. As Fishman (1981) suggests:

There is little reason to suppose that control agents are somehow immune to the messages transmitted by the media. Indeed the segregated position of some control agents makes them peculiarly susceptible in certain media images. It becomes difficult for (these control agents) not to see themselves as front line defenders of the social order. (434)

The following chapter will present a discussion that centers on the ways in which front-line workers in the welfare system talked about and "made sense" of the welfare fraud problem. As we shall see, the front-line workers interviewed for this study attributed meaning to the welfare fraud problem by identifying how the government had failed to recognize their position as mediators of information. This led to feelings of "betrayal" felt by the workers and shaped the way in which these workers discussed the problems they had identified with the welfare reform.
The Welfare Problem and Front-Line Workers

The procedural and legislative changes that have been made to British Columbia's welfare system over the last two years have redefined the work that front-line workers perform. Workers are now required to conduct business from a system-centered approach which limits both their discretionary power and their ability to help those in need. A system-centered approach to providing welfare benefits shifts the focus of concern away from the needs of the client and onto the "needs" of the system. Phrases such as "worker accountability", "fiscal responsibility", and "efficient delivery of service" have become part of the official language of the welfare system more so now than in the past. The impact that the changes to the welfare system have had on clients, although multifaceted, generally is quite apparent; recipients of welfare have had their benefits reduced, limited, or eliminated which, for many, has forced them further into poverty. The human face of welfare is evident if one travels through Vancouver's downtown Eastside or passes by the welfare office on the corner of Nelson and Seymour on "Welfare Wednesday". However, there is another side to welfare found inside welfare offices across BC.

This chapter will present the side of welfare that few see - the personal accounts and experiences of front-line workers in the welfare system in relation to the recent welfare reform. The chapter will focus more specifically on the ways in which workers have been affected by the recent welfare reform including the impact that the computerization of welfare, through which many of the changes made to the welfare system were realized, has had on their job and their interactions with clients. The chapter will also include an
analysis of the front-line workers' discussions of the welfare reform and how they have shaped an understanding of the factors they believe have had the greatest impact on their work.

The Interviews

The data that will be presented in this chapter were gathered from interviews conducted with twelve front-line workers from two Vancouver welfare offices. Of the twelve workers interviewed, one of the staff members was a front desk clerk, two held positions as District Supervisors, and nine worked as financial assistance workers. All of the subjects interviewed had been working for the Ministry of Social Services for a minimum of two years. There were eight female respondents and four male respondents used in the study. Four of the respondents had a Social Services Worker diploma from a local community college and the remaining seven had undergraduate University degrees. The interviewing process was informal and was based on the use of open-ended questions geared to elicit the workers' personal opinions with regards to the effect that the changes to the welfare system have had on the nature of their work, their relationships with co-workers, and their relationships with clients. The interviews took approximately one hour to complete. Each participant signed a consent form prior to the interview being conducted and was assured that any material that might reveal their identity would be excluded from print.

A convenience sample technique was used to select the front-line workers interviewed for this study. During a team meeting, I gave a brief presentation of the purpose of my study and welcomed anyone who would be willing to participate. The

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1See Appendix II for a list of the questions that each respondent in this study was asked.
workers who participated in this study were located in the same office where I was working and, as well, in the office down the hall. My familiarity with these workers varied. Five of the workers I knew quite well and had worked with over the course of my employment. The remaining seven were workers that I knew on an informal basis but had rarely conversed with on issues pertaining to this study. In this sense I was not familiar with their attitudes surrounding work-related issues. All of the workers who volunteered to participate in this study were eager to share their experiences related to their front-line work.

Office Structure

In the 1993/1994 fiscal year there were 893 front-line workers employed in the Ministry of Social Services in British Columbia. The staff composition of welfare offices in BC generally consists of three front desk staff, one district supervisor, and between six and nine financial assistance workers depending on the size of the geographical area covered by the district office\(^2\). The exception to this are the offices in Northern BC which employ fewer staff due to the smaller client population in those regions.

The front desk staff are responsible for entering information from the client application form into the computer, distributing documents submitted by clients to financial assistance workers, answering the phones, combining files, and general office duties. The front desk staff are often the first contact that a client has when he/she enters the welfare office. They act as the "gate-keepers" as it is often the front desk staff that determines whether or not a client will be granted access to the financial assistance worker. Some offices enforce rules pertaining to client access. For example, the requests of clients who

\(^2\)Offices that have been designated as Early Detection and Prevention sites have a Verification Officer on staff. Certain offices also have a Family Maintenance Worker who is responsible for covering a geographical area larger than that which the particular district office covers.
come to the office to see a financial worker without a scheduled appointment, are evaluated by the front desk staff as to whether or not their immediate situation constitutes an “emergency”. If it is determined that the client’s request is not an emergency, he/she is told to phone their worker for a scheduled appointment. In this sense, the interactions that front desk staff have with clients are often problematic in that the client views these workers as impediments to having their requests heard and/or granted by the financial assistance worker. As such, these workers develop skills aimed at de-escalating hostile interactions and the ability to negotiate with clients who demand immediate service. The front reception of district offices is an open area which creates easy access to these workers by clients.

Financial assistance workers are responsible for assessing applicants’ requests for welfare benefits. These workers interview clients, request documents needed to determine eligibility, and inform applicants of the eligibility decision. Caseload management is also a duty assigned to the financial assistance worker whereby they monitor, assess, and re-interview clients who are in receipt of benefits. Financial workers liaise with other community agencies and refer clients to support services such as food banks, mental health agencies, free clothing outlets, hostels and so on. They also refer clients to Training Consultants who provide education and employment counselling and program placement.³

Financial Assistance Workers are situated in individual offices within the district office that are equipped with a direct phone line, voice mail, and a computer. Some of the offices occupied by these workers are also equipped with “panic buttons”, located on the underside of the desk, which are used to alert other staff members in the event of an emergency. The need for precautionary safety measures stems in part from the position

³Training Consultants are employed by the Ministry of Skills and Training. They are responsible for placing clients in education and employment programs sponsored by the Government.
that financial assistance workers have to inform clients, often in a face to face interaction, of their eligibility for assistance. A client who is denied welfare benefits may view the determination as a “personal” decision by the worker and as a result direct their anger and frustration at the worker.

There is one supervisor assigned to each district welfare office. They are responsible for monitoring office budgets and expenditures, processing client appeals, mediating client/worker disputes, and assessing client requests that exceed the financial assistance worker’s spending authority. The district supervisor is also required to keep staff members informed of procedural and legislative changes which is accomplished in part through scheduled weekly or bi-monthly team meetings. Information is also shared over the computer system via the Ministry’s E-mail system. The district supervisor positions are filled by former financial assistance workers who have been employed by the Ministry for a minimum of five years.

An important part of the district supervisor’s role is the assessment of client complaints. The supervisor has the authority to overturn a financial assistance worker’s decision with regards to a client’s eligibility for benefits, and therefore it is important that a balance is struck between supporting a worker’s decision and appeasing the needs of the client. A supervisor who is viewed as being either too “worker supportive” or “client supportive” may contribute to an atmosphere in the office of increased client hostility, worker dissention, and diminished office morale.

The front desk clerks, financial assistance workers, and the district supervisor constitute the front-line workers in the welfare office. They are the people who are in direct contact with welfare applicants and recipients on a daily basis. The welfare reform that was initiated in 1994 has impacted these welfare workers on different levels and in varying
degrees. The remainder of this chapter will present the personal accounts of front-line workers who have endured through the changes to the welfare system. The discussion will be presented with an eye towards illuminating the ways in which workers cope in a changing work environment.

Trust and Betrayal

The majority of front-line workers interviewed for this study either implied or overtly stated that they felt as though they had been betrayed by the government, and more specifically, by the welfare administration through the implementation of policies and procedures that changed the scope of welfare benefits and service delivery. The betrayal that these workers experienced was identified as being the government’s philosophical shift away from focusing on meeting the needs of the client to a way of thinking that was centered on system accountability.

“I think that the change in the philosophy of the Ministry has affected the job the most and the direction the Ministry is going. I mean, all the minor changes and stuff that we whine and complain about, we still adapt and incorporate them into our daily service. But the change in philosophy and the direction that the Ministry is heading have been the biggest change. It was never my expectation when I came into this line or work and that’s where we’re headed. Because for me the word “social services” meant and stood for something and right now “social services” doesn’t mean a whole lot. As far as the Ministry is concerned it doesn’t mean anything.”

“They talk about fiscal restraint and I guess that’s a part of it too, but still there’s a lot of outside forces dictating the government policy; the media, business, trying to appease the general public instead of following their own political beliefs or philosophy. I think there’s too much focus on deficits and lack of money and all kinds of stuff. And I think there’s too many scare tactics about deficits and it’s all bullshit. We’re no longer in the people business. This is all about discouraging people and as many people as possible and getting money out of the system.”

“The change in values and philosophy have had the greatest impact. Basically the philosophical shift from an organization that’s supposed to be
The feeling of betrayal identified by these workers suggests that a relationship of trust had existed between workers and the welfare administration prior to the welfare reform. As government employees, one would assume that they would be somewhat immune to change as government ministries are subject to frequent change depending on the political climate. Notwithstanding this however, workers were able to maintain a belief in the integrity of the administration and a sense of trust that the welfare system would not be negatively impacted by public discord. Barbara Misztal's (1996) discussion of “trust” suggests that trust between people can be generated from a likelihood that the parties involved will act in a particular way and that there is a low probability that either party will act in a fashion that is damaging to the other. (82) Mitszal also suggests that trusting in another person or persons involves an expectation that they will behave in a particular way in the future and that even though a situation may arise that challenges the trust relationship, the person(s) will meet the obligation under conflicting circumstances. (1996:24)

The author's discussion of trust, in this sense, sheds light on the front-line workers' belief that the welfare administration would uphold the existing principles of the organization in spite of the public pressure the government was under to implement change. The workers who felt betrayed by the government's philosophical shift, that was evident in the
changes made to policies and procedures, believed that the administration could have explored other options for change that would have maintained the status quo. Misztal proposes that when a breach of trust occurs in a relationship it is not perceived as a betrayal if unforeseen circumstances arose which prevented the party from fulfilling their obligations. (1996:24) Betrayal, according to Mitszal, occurs only when the breach of trust is considered to be intentional and it is this belief that causes the greatest pain and distrust for those affected. (1996:24) The front-line workers who said they felt betrayed by the administration were clearly the most dissatisfied with their current job situation and disillusioned with regards to what they perceived as being the future of the welfare system.

"I feel that the situation is already changing and I'm not able to do what I used to and now things are changing more and it gets to that point where everything I want to do I can't do and that's frustrating for me. I do not enjoy my job. I feel I'm only here for a job and it's not anything regarding in my mind. I'm already feeling less and less of that. And I feel it's going to get worse."

"We hear about the end of welfare so I think that's the direction we're going. On the one hand they've got this emphasis on fraud but on the other hand they're encouraging every Tom, Dick, and Harry to apply for electronic deposit. So you've got to ask yourself what this means and what it means is that they're willing to accept the possible cost of fraud around direct deposit but that's a direction they want to go. They take discretion away from us and caseloads away from us and discretionary grants there's not need for workers. If it's not a social service you don't need workers."

"I never felt there was energy directed at supporting staff. I got the message that front-line workers are being hung out to dry, undermined, targeted, disregarded, disrespected actively rather than passively. That's my perception for the last three to four months. Senior management who are governing by media whose immediate political agenda is number one and attended to at all costs regardless of damage. And it's done to clients and workers. So senior management is seen as being tough on civil servants and fiscally responsible. I think it's a lie but that's the intent."

In addition to workers feeling a sense of betrayal with regards to the philosophical shift that took place within the welfare system, some workers also expressed resentment...
at not having been consulted prior to the changes being implemented. Workers felt that the administration had been neglectful of their needs and disrespectful of their ability to meaningfully contribute to finding solutions to the problems faced by the administration. This suggests that the betrayal that the front-line workers experienced occurred on two levels. First, the administration's move towards a "tougher" approach to the delivery of welfare benefits reflected a right wing agenda that workers believed ran counter to the expected political ideology of the current government. The overall shift in the philosophy of the government resulted in workers feeling forced to perform their duties within an ideological framework that they believed was antithetical to the humanist mandate of the welfare program. Some workers were able to reconcile this breach of trust, to some extent, by attempting to override the administration's ideology with their own philosophical beliefs.

"And I think where the person is coming from even though the policies are quite harsh we can still approach people with that human touch. I think we need to be a bit more tolerant with some people knowing their background, because underneath there's good in everybody and it's just life's circumstances that may cause a person to be the way they are."

"But you can only stretch policy so far, so if I can't help people I make damn sure they have a list of place that can, and I pass the names of the politicians that have made the policy decisions. You do as much brokering as you can. I work with the antipoverty groups as much as I can, you know, the brown envelope stuff."

"We have choices as workers to some degree and for me I've always tried to not compromise my delivery of service to clients. Sometime with great pains to myself but with choice in doing that - such as working overtime, unpaid overtime, if it seemed to be necessary to spend a longer period of time with a client. You know, it's little things that go a long way to make trying to do a difficult job easier."

The workers who experienced a form of philosophical or ideological betrayal were, in some respects, able to compensate for the punitive measures that they believed the administration had taken against welfare clients. The workers maintained and, at times,
enhanced their client centered approach to service delivery.

On the other hand, workers who felt betrayed by their lack of involvement or input with respect to the development and implementation of the welfare reform were more apt to harbor feelings of resentment towards the administration and increased negativity towards their job.

"I would think that management should defend the mission statement of the Ministry as much as possible but clearly they don't care. It's just a job to them, they're making the big bucks. So who cares. The direction is from the Minister or the government and they just follow. And they don't care about line staff. And a good indication of that is that line staff is never consulted when changes are made that affect clients as well as workers. They just dump on staff and assume we'll adapt."

"And I think that those that are responsible for making the changes to the legislation could've done a damn site better. My biggest problem is that management since day one hasn't consulted with front-line staff. It's bullshit. I've never been asked for my opinion and chances are it would never go where it's supposed to go. We as front-line staff, have a great deal to offer. We have a lot of valuable information and ideas. And there's a lot of things we would do to really improve the system. But because there hasn't been an avenue for us to make our ideas known they go unheard. We sit around the coffee room and bitch about it and say "fuck this and fuck that" but it goes nowhere."

"There's an air of dishonesty about management, or administration, that they give a shit about what front-line people think. Not even union executive give a shit about front-line workers. But because this is civil service there's lip service paid. There's the misconception that the front-line people matter. They couldn't care less about the lower end of the hierarchy. There's some cognitive dissonance there - the truth of the matter is that all the new changes - it's very clear how this system works.

The workers who experienced a sense of betrayal due to their exclusion from participating in the reformation of the welfare system felt as though their opinions should have been taken into consideration by the administration. Even those workers who agreed with the changes that have been made to the welfare system were offended by their lack of involvement in the decision-making process. This reaction from workers is due, in part, to
management’s insistence that the views and suggestions from front-line staff are taken into consideration when organizational changes are made.

Workers implied that they were led to believe that the administration was, on some level, concerned with the impact that the changes would have on field staff. This reassurance was fostered through such things as district office visits by welfare officials and advisory committees consisting of front-line staff and administrators. The union also played a role by voicing their concerns with regards to the impact that the welfare reform would have for workers and clients. The reassurances and obligatory considerations that were given to front-line workers helped to establish a sense of trust that the administration would uphold workers’ concerns in the reformation process. However, the actual implementation of the changes appeared to workers to be devoid of any consideration with regards to the repercussions that the changes had for front-line staff.

“I agree philosophically with the changes, but like I said, to put it into practice and make sense of it is sometimes difficult. We have to process the application, we have to explain to the client what it means. And there’s criteria that I don’t even understand. So subsequently it’s going to be a workload issue. It’s going to cause stress.”

“There’s been enormous changes in legislation. And a lot of it was really necessary. We were crying out for change. I just don’t believe that the way the changes were done was right. I think a lot of the changes have been untimely. Everything seems to happen at once. I mean now it seems like every time we get our minds wrapped around a new piece of legislation they change it on us.”

The feelings of betrayal that workers experienced throughout the welfare reform arose out of a trust that was held in the administration’s ability to honour their concerns and uphold the interests of clients. Mitszal suggests that what makes trust puzzling (especially in relationships with an inherent imbalance of power) is that “to trust involves more than believing; in fact, to trust is to believe despite uncertainty”(1996:19) She writes:
Trust always involves an element of risk resulting from our inability to monitor others' behaviour, from our inability to have a complete knowledge about other people's motivations and, generally from the contingency of social reality. Consequently, one's behaviour is influenced by one's beliefs about the likelihood of others behaving or not behaving in a certain way rather than solely by a cognitive understanding or by firm and certain calculation. (1996:19)

The responses of workers' in this study suggest that a tenuous relationship based on trust existed within the welfare bureaucracy between front-line workers and the welfare administration, despite the fact that the workers had no real knowledge of the intentions of the administration. The betrayal of trust that workers experienced however, has had a significant impact on their feelings towards their job, their co-workers and their clients.

Staff and Client Relations

Horejsi, Walz and Connolly (1977) conducted an in-depth study of the public welfare system in the United States. More specifically, the researchers were interested in examining the deteriorating working conditions of public welfare workers and the ways in which the public assistance bureaucracy failed to meet the needs of clients and workers alike. At the time the research was conducted, the public welfare system in the United States was undergoing dramatic change with respect to rapid expansion, an increased focus on worker accountability, and the introduction of computer technology. The researchers found that the dehumanizing work environment of the welfare bureaucracy significantly affected the workers' ability to deliver services to the poor in a humanistic and compassionate manner. Furthermore, those workers who practice their trade from a social work perspective were more likely to experience the negative impacts of a system that was moving towards a more depersonalized type of service delivery. The authors write:
Our research for this book suggests that much of the frustrations of welfare workers is associated with the introduction of new administrative procedures and the nature of the reorganization which is occurring. Those experiencing the greatest threat seems to be the traditional social work group. Our evidence points to a growing confrontation between those who identify with the social welfare function and the new managers who seem principally identified with improving the efficiency of welfare administration. (1977:71)

The welfare system in British Columbia has undergone a similar type of reform as that which was carried out in the public welfare bureaucracy in the United States in the late 1970's. As well, the effects on worker morale in BC welfare offices, as a result of the changes made to the welfare system, seem similar to those experienced by those working in the American welfare system.

Front-line workers in BC's welfare system find it increasingly difficult to provide meaningful client service in a system where the overall philosophy has shifted from a client-centered approach to one of system accountability and a move towards depersonalized service delivery. It is important to recognize that the front-line workers interviewed for this study began their careers at a time when the welfare system was relatively lax with regards to policy and procedures in providing benefits to clients. The emphasis was placed on meeting client need, (at times, regardless of whether or not they met eligibility criteria), through the use of the gray areas within policy. The changes that have been made to the welfare system however have eliminated many of the "loop holes" previously available to workers to issue benefits to clients. This has created frustration for front-line workers who are now limited in their ability to assist those in need. Workers revealed the effect that the restrictions on administering benefits has had on their interactions with clients:

"I hate saying 'no' so much that I tend to avoid clients I know I have to say 'no' to. I know that sounds awful but that's what I do. I tend to avoid them when I can't give them anything. If I can give them something I phone them up instantly. And I sometimes will become very harsh with someone when I have to deny them. I become defensive already because I'm waiting for the
fight. It causes a lot of stress. You have to be creative as far as trying to
give them as much as you can, but that now is going to be out of our hands.
You can't be creative anymore.”

“It [the changes] has affected my relationships with clients because I'm more
guarded in my approach and the things I say with clients. And I'm not as free
as before because I always have to keep in the back of my head 'fiscal
restraint' and you can't be too creative, you have to follow the policy and
legislation as much as possible. So my approach to clients in that respect is
a bit guarded. I have to play with clients because I can't be as up front as I
used to be. And I have to play the game the government wants me to play.”
So I try and do that as much as possible. That's how I do it. I mean it's dirty
and underhanded but....."

The front-line worker is in the position of having to inform clients of their eligibility for
welfare benefits and they often are required to explain complex eligibility criteria to clients
who are unfamiliar with the new rules. The financial assistance worker is also viewed by
the client as being the primary person who is in the position to provide assistance which
becomes problematic for the worker who is bound by restrictions and required to abide by
the new policy directives. The changing role of the worker, from "helper" to "administrator
of benefits", not only strains client/worker relations but also reduces the positive aspects
of the job for those workers who have been accustomed to providing benefits for those they
believed were in need.

“They’ll [clients] be frustrated because they don't understand why things are
changing that’s one thing. We try and explain to them why things are
changing, it’s not us, the policies change and we’re just doing our job. They
take it personally and they get frustrated and sometimes we do have critical
incidences. It’s especially hard for the front staff trying to deal with it and it’s
very stressful for everybody." 

“Of course clients can't understand the changes, we don't even understand
the changes so we understand the change because they're there in writing
but some workers may not agree. It makes our job a lot tougher. We try to
explain to clients that this is the hardship code - they don't even understand
what a hardship code is. They understand temporary assistance is all income
assistance. But to explain to clients hardship assistance and what they need
to do to prove to us that they are eligible for regular assistance. And our
relationship with the clients is affected because sometime they don't
understand what we're trying to say and we're just trying to do our job. I think it's difficult for the client even more than us."

In addition to front-line workers experiencing pressures from clients who are dissatisfied and/or openly hostile, office morale and the relations between workers have also been negatively affected by the welfare reform. Some of the workers interviewed identified a breakdown in communication between workers, and at times, open confrontations.

"You know stress manifests itself in different ways. There are days when you're so busy and run ragged. I've personally been curt with my co-workers and I see that a lot. When people are under pressure they take that out on each other."

"I see less of them [co-workers]. People are working unpaid overtime they aren't taking breaks. All workers are overloaded and people are starting to blame each other. Admin are blaming workers and FAWs and visa versa. When there's no way to maintain a professional atmosphere. The last three to four months have been the most difficult for me because the effects of constant change and reorganization are cumulative."

"And people who hated their jobs, were stressed out, and in turn they took it out on each other just from stress. They lashed out at each other. We had a few fights go on between co-workers that we never had before. We had one guy who was sick a lot, like once a week, so there was a lot of resentment towards him. Because when he didn't show up we'd have to do his work. But I think it was stress related. You'd hear him screaming at clients sometimes."

The decrease in office morale can be attributed in part to the increasing workload pressures that accompanied many of the changes made to the welfare system. Due to increased demands associated with cumbersome forms and processing procedures, workers have less time to converse with one another and provide support to those experiencing difficulty in administering benefits according to the new rules. The differences between workers, with regards to those who supported the new mandate of the Ministry and those who opposed it, became more apparent and resulted in increased tensions amongst district office
workers.

The morale of front-line workers in the welfare office is at its lowest point. Workers have become overburdened with complex rules, paperwork, increased caseloads and strained client relations. The recent changes to the welfare system have re-shaped the worker's role with respect to providing service to clients. Front-line workers have become "program administrators" as their ability counsel clients, or even lend a sympathetic ear, has been significantly challenged by the expectations and time constraints inherent in the policy and procedural changes. Relations between workers have also been impacted as workers are often too busy trying to keep up with the increased system demands that they are limited in their capacity to support fellow workers.

Computer Technology and Surveillance

In 1990 the Ministry of Human Resources introduced the Release 5 computer system as a means of streamlining client information and providing a more efficient delivery of service. The use of computer technology in the welfare bureaucracy also allowed the administration to keep a more accurate account of system expenditures and the fiscal budget. Front-line workers believed that computer technology would reduce their workload by replacing the time-consuming paper documents that were previously used. However, some front-line workers argued that the increased reliance on computer technology in the performance of their job has led to an increase in workload as they are now expected to complete tasks quicker and more accurately.

"As soon as we got the computers the Area Manager said 'well, you can do applications all day long - all you have to do is push a button and it's done'. So you just keep churning out those applications and if someone needs something you just do an application on the spot."
It's [the computer] more efficient. There's less room for error. You don't have to write things out by hand so it's faster. On the other hand it places more demands on us because we're capable of doing things faster. But every time they add a new feature they burden us with more work and they're not putting in the supports to allow the system to cope with it. So year after year it seems to be crashing more and more and more. And that really bugs me. A five minute response time, the system is pretty much down. Even a ten second response time - seconds add up to minutes and are we paid to sit and stare at a screen? I don't think so."

In addition to the expectations that workers feel exist with regards to having to complete work faster, they also identified the negative aspects that the use of computer technology has on their interactions with clients.

Theodore Roszak's (1986) discussion of computer technology and the affects it has on human interactions elucidates the front-line workers' concerns with regards to the erosion of their relations with clients. Roszak writes:

However ambitiously "information" may be defined by its enthusiasts and specialists, all that the data banks and their attendants are after is data at the most primitive level: simple, atomized facts.... They exist to reduce people to statistical skeletons for rapid assessment: name, social security number, bank balance, debts, credit rating, salary, welfare payments, taxes, number of arrests, outstanding warrants. No ambiguities, no subtleties, no complexities. The information that data banks hold is life stripped down to the bare necessities required for a quick commercial or legal decision. (1986:186)

Roszak's (1986) discussion highlights the power that computer technology has in reducing individuals to neat objectified categories. The welfare system services a variety of people from the mentally ill, physically challenged, drug and alcohol addicted, the chronically unemployed, and in some cases, the well educated. Front-line workers are required to assess the wide range of needs of these individuals according to strict objective criteria outlined in policy. The use of computer generated forms aides in accomplishing this process by restricting how a client can be categorized and subsequently what, if any, benefits he/she will receive. The welfare administration is able to ensure, to a high degree,
that the policies and procedures will be followed by workers through the implementation of computer system changes that make it virtually impossible for workers to “over-ride” the computer. One worker stated this concern:

“The dangerous thing about it, and what the current administrators are using it for, is to control our ability to assist people and that’s something the Socreds never did. There was always that over-ride button. It’s only since this present regime that things have really tightened up.”

Not only is the discretionary power of workers further restricted by the computer, the workers’ ability to treat clients in a compassionate manner has also been adversely affected. The front-line worker’s priorities have shifted from spending time with the client to completing forms and entering information into the computer. Furthermore, the worker is dependent on the computer as the information required to assess eligibility and generate a cheque for a client must first be entered into the computer. The frenzy to enter accurate information into the system and correct any mistakes identified by the system is often at the expense of the client. The peripheral needs that the client may have, those that do not have a direct bearing on their eligibility for benefits, are often overlooked in the worker’s preoccupation to process the client’s immediate request.

“The whole trend towards automation and computerization. I think what’s happening is that it’s gradually taking the hands on human contact aspect out of the job. I find that I spend a lot more time sitting in front of my terminal typing things constantly. When I have an interview with a client I get through the meaty issues as quick as I can and then I focus my energies on getting the stuff into the computer. A lot less time talking to people, there’s a lot less time. There as so many more tasks for us to perform now that there’s less time to spend with clients. We basically process people. I feel like a heartless shit sometimes. But the bottom line is ‘what can I do to help you’. I don’t have time to hear all the rest.”

“I think that our expectations and demands of the job have changed. We need to do something and do it quicker. I saw a guy today who was out of food and I could spit out a cheque in three minutes. I don’t have time to sit and talk to this guy. If I had to write out a long story about his circumstances, about what led up to him being in need. I mean it’s obvious, we don’t give our
clients enough money. So why go through the whole thing. They’re out of food because they don’t have enough money. Forget it, who cares. I don’t dig like I used to. I just don’t have the time. It’s like ‘you’re in need? Ok, fine’.

Computer technology is often viewed initially as a solution to reducing complexities within an organization and streamlining work processes. However, it can also create a work environment characterized by depersonalized service delivery and a dehumanized approach to the clients of the organization. The negative aspects of the use of computer technology is evident in the welfare system. The ways in which computer technology is used to achieve greater efficiency and a higher degree of accountability has resulted in an increase in workload and, in turn, a decrease in the amount of time a worker is able to spend with a client.

Some workers identified the positive aspects of having client information “on-line” such as quicker access to the information and a more organized system of storing data. Although there are inherent benefits to the use of technology in the welfare bureaucracy, it is imperative to recognize as well the dangers associated with this advancement. Roszak (1986) explains:

...those who sit before the scintillating video screens, stroking keys, calling up authoritative charts and graphs and simulations, are bound to feel briskly in step with the times. They are the masters of the world’s data, working at the leading edge of the information society. What easily drops out of sight is the fact that all the machines they confront are operating in obedience to programs that are based upon assumptions and values. What they have before them is not, in some purely neutral sense of the term, “raw data” that are being offered up for their judicious consideration....this information has been edited, shaped, weighted and ordered; it reflects priorities perhaps of a higher ideological kind. (204)

The trend towards reducing the number of individuals collecting welfare benefits and the increased scrutiny under which requests for assistance are assessed is easily attended to through the use of new technologies. The welfare administration in BC has shaped the
current welfare system according to this ideology and has enforced new policies and procedures, to a large extent, through computer system enhancements. Front-line workers are restricted in exercising discretion and issuing benefits by the checks and balances built into the Release 5 system. The limits placed on workers has led to increased frustration and has diminished their ability to provide meaningful service to clients.

Not only has the use of computer technology limited the use of worker discretion, it has also allowed for the expansion of surveillance techniques and has increased the scope of information needed to determine eligibility. The policy and procedural change that reflects this trend is witnessed in the "warrant check" that is now conducted on welfare applicants. In April 1997 the Ministry of Social Service’s Prevention, Compliance, and Enforcement Unit and the Ministry of the Attorney General came to an agreement that anyone who had an outstanding warrant for an indictable offense would not be eligible for welfare benefits. In order to confirm whether or not an individual applying for welfare benefits has an outstanding warrant, the Financial Assistance Worker forwards the applicant’s personal information to the PCE Unit who, in turn, forwards the information to the Ministry of the Attorney General. A CPIC is conducted on the individual to determine whether or not a warrant exists. Although challenged by civil liberty groups, this new policy continues to be enforced and used in wide-scale "sweeps" of particular welfare offices. The sharing of information between government ministries, which is facilitated through computer technology, illustrates how the surveillance and control of welfare recipients is expanding.

The Welfare Reform and Front-Line Workers

The front-line workers interviewed for this study revealed their frustrations associated
with working in a welfare system that has structured itself in such a way that the needs of recipients are overlooked but that has also failed to address the position that workers are in with respect to the delivery of services. The welfare reform that has taken place in BC's welfare system was the result of several factors, many of which have been addressed in the previous chapter. The effects that the welfare reform has had on welfare recipients are quite apparent; they have been subjected to benefit reductions and the increased use of surveillance techniques that scrutinize their need for government aid. Understanding the position that front-line workers are now in, however, requires further examination.

The front-line workers in this study, spoke very little about how the recent changes to the welfare system, and the apparent "clamp down" on welfare recipients, has impacted their relationships with welfare recipients. Instead, their responses to questions concerning how their relationships with recipients have been affected were often centered around moralistic talk about how the current government has neglected to take their needs into consideration in the development of policies. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the front-line workers' comments with respect to the claims they made concerning the welfare reform and the impact that it has had on their position as the "mediators of policies" in the current welfare system.

Central to this analysis is the examination of the ways in which the government's ownership of the welfare fraud problem, and the moralizing of welfare recipients inherent in the government's claims-making activities and legitimation of control measures, affected those who work in the welfare system. In addressing the welfare fraud problem, the government engaged in a type of overt moral conduct that was witnessed in the language used both to describe the problem of welfare fraud and single out those segments of the welfare population allegedly taking part in the fraudulent activities. Schneider (1984)
suggests that although it is important to examine the language used in this type of public morality it is also equally important to identify how that talk differs from the more routine moral language of participants and larger social networks. (184)

The front-line workers described their “participation” in the welfare reform through moral language directed at the government, and more specifically, the welfare administration to describe problems they experienced in the welfare reform. Workers spoke of the welfare administration as being “disrespectful” and “undermining” and as having an “air of dishonesty” in their development of policies. Because the actual application of restrictive and regulatory policies rests with front-line workers the “moralistic talk” that takes place within the welfare system has shifted. The welfare administration, more so than the welfare recipient, has become the target in the exercise of valuation and judgement by front-line workers. This is not to say that welfare recipients have somehow become exempt from the regulatory moral practices of welfare workers. Rather, the focus that has been placed on the welfare administration, and the workers’ candid dissatisfaction with the welfare reform, can be viewed as having had a modifying effect on their treatment of welfare recipients. As well, by placing the “onus of responsibility” on the welfare administration for creating policies that are less concerned with the actual “welfare” of those in need, front-line workers are able to distance themselves, to some extent, from the punitive measures they are required to enforce. The rule-bound setting in which front-line workers apply government policy allows them to shift responsibility to the “rule-makers” in their interactions with welfare recipients. Schneider (1984) points out:

Rules do infringe. They are made and applied typically in an attempt to control, or at least to symbolize, effectiveness aside, how one should behave and/or think. Those who make rules, those “responsible” for them, have presumed the prerogative to do just that. Those on the other hand, who use rules....are usually free of this moral burden. At minimum, enforcers have
such responsibility shifting accounts available; “I’m just doing my job. I didn’t make the rules.” (193)

The shifting of responsibility that workers engage in, not only allows them to distance themselves from the consequences of the punitive rules they are required to enforce, but it also enables them to make claims about the problems associated with the welfare reform without having to confront those who created the rules. This type of “loose moral talk” that workers employed in their responses to questions posed concerning the impact that the changes associated with the welfare reform had on them, their dealings with clients, and their relationships with co-workers suggests that in particular “non-threatening” settings, front-line workers are more likely to allocate responsibility to the higher welfare authorities. Schneider (1984) suggests:

What is going on when people wax indignant about this or that alleged condition or conduct to associates, friends, family members, or available others, while being careful not to confront those involved or responsible with such claims-making talk? It may be that such loose moral talk is one way we define for ourselves and others, the moral contours of our personal lives and the larger social world. It may be a “low-risk” way to be a moral actor, indeed, even a “moral entrepreneur,” in a work in which explicit moral enterprise seems too threatening, ineffective, or unavailable. While we may think better about actually lodging a claim to another’s face, it is considerably easier to “talk big,” using explicit moral language about problematic persons and/or conditions. (202)

The recent welfare reform has had negative consequences for front-line workers in the welfare system. These consequences were identified by the workers interviewed for this study who expressed that they felt “betrayed” by the government and its uncompromising approach in the restructuring of the welfare system. The comments made by these workers can be understood by situating them within the context of a “trust and betrayal” analysis. However, although the content of the workers’ comments are important, an analysis of the way in which workers stated their frustrations is equally significant. How
these workers “talked” about the issues that were important to them, or have been made to be important to them because of the work they do, involves a collective process through which meaning is arrived at and responsibility assigned. The front-line workers in this study illustrate how those employed in the welfare system, in some ways, have made sense of the measures taken by the current welfare administration and, by distancing themselves from the decisions made by the welfare administration, these workers are able to justify their claim that the welfare reform is “disrespectful” and “demeaning” to them and detrimental to those in need of welfare benefits.

The workers’ use of this type of “loose moral talk” not only allows them to distance themselves from the government’s punitive measures, but it also allows them to retain their self-identity to a certain degree. Those workers who adamantly oppose the current government’s approach to the management of the welfare system readily speak out about the inequities they see and are responsible for enforcing through existing policies. The use of “loose moral talk” enables these workers to preserve themselves and, by voicing their concerns with regards to the recent welfare reform and the treatment of welfare recipients, they are able to maintain, to some degree, a balance between what they are required to do as Financial Assistance Workers and their own personal, political, and philosophical beliefs.

The more subversive practices that some front-line workers use deal more specifically with the issuance of benefits to welfare recipients who are clearly not eligible for benefits but who the worker believes are experiencing some form of immediate hardship. This “bending of the rules” and, at times, a clear defiance of the rules was not talked about openly by those who were interviewed for this study. These subversive tactics however were observed and are used by front-line workers as a means of reconciling their contradictory roles as both the “helpers” and “controllers” of welfare recipients. Workers
vary with respect to the number of times they have “bent the rules” and issued benefits to an individual who was not, according to policy, eligible for benefits. It would seem, as well, that the stricter and more constraining welfare policies become, the more likely these types of subversive practices will be employed.
In this research paper I have examined the impact of the recent welfare reform on both those who receive welfare benefits and those whose job it is to administer government assistance. Chapter two presented a detailed review of the changes that have been made to British Columbia's welfare system with respect to both policy and procedures. The effects that these changes have had on welfare recipients and front-line workers were addressed with an eye towards illuminating the extent to which welfare benefits have been reduced and/or eliminated and the difficulties that front-line workers encounter in their dealings with client as a result of these changes.

In Chapter three I examined the moral panic that was created through widespread media coverage in 1993 and 1994 of the alleged welfare fraud and abuse that was taking place within the welfare system. The moral panic surrounding welfare fraud and abuse was dependent on certain myths that have been used to shape the public's understanding of certain segments of the welfare population. These sub-groups of welfare recipients; the able-bodied, outsiders, and single mothers, were portrayed by media reports as the groups most involved in the commission of fraudulent welfare activities. In order to further an understanding of the welfare fraud crisis that had been generated by the media, I also included an analysis of the "problem" within the context of social constructionist theory. Gusfield's (1981) notions of ownership and casual and political responsibility were useful frameworks in which to examine the government's, and other group's, involvement in the construction of this contemporary social problem.

In Chapter four I presented the findings of the interviews that I had conducted with
front-line workers in the welfare system. The comments made by these workers were analysed within the context of “trust and betrayal” theory. I also examined the responses of front-line workers by looking at how they have “made sense” of the welfare reform and how, in doing so, have distanced themselves from the punitive measures they are required to enforce.

This research project has demonstrated not only how a social problem is created but how those who work in organizations affected by social problems are influenced. The welfare system in BC presented itself as an excellent setting in which to examine the processes involved in both the construction of a social problem and how those on the “inside” make sense of the measures taken by a particulate organization to deal with the “problem”. My interest in this study was sparked by a project that had been conducted in 1977 by Horejsi, Walz, and Connolly which studied the impact that a welfare reform taking place in the United States had on front-line workers and clients. However, despite my attempts, I could not locate a similar study that reflected that which I was interested in doing. Unlike other types of reforms, the one that had taken place in the welfare system has had far reaching consequences for both welfare recipients and workers and it was for this reason that I felt the issue needed to be addressed.

The uniqueness of my study is also evidenced in the fact that I have been, and continue to be, employed as a front-line worker in the welfare system. Therefore I have witnessed first hand the impact that these changes have had on welfare recipients and my co-workers. In this study I have attempted to shed some light on the difficulties that workers experience in administering welfare benefits under such restrictive policies as those found within the current welfare system.

Suggestion for Further Research
This study is important because it examines not only the construction of a social problem but how those in an organization responsible for “fixing” the problem are affected. Social problems that have been constructed in other areas, such as the environment, medicine, the law, and other government agencies (i.e. Worker’s Compensation and ICBC) would benefit from an analysis that examines the effects that these “problems” have had on those who work in the particular organization or agency.

Due to time constraints and lack of resources, my study is limited with regards to the number of front-line workers I was able to interview. Further research in this area would benefit from the use of a larger sample of welfare workers.

Finally, future research will be needed with regards to the changing nature of welfare in modern society. This study has examined the initial response of the government in relation to the welfare fraud “crisis”. It is likely that there are more changes to come that will further alter the way in which services are provided to the poor.
References


Schneider, Joseph. "Morality, social problems, and everyday life". *Studies in the Sociology*


Bibliography


**Appendix I**

Welfare System Expenditures in British Columbia - Fiscal Year 1993-1994

Program Scope

Clients (March 1993)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Dependants</th>
<th>Total recipients/beneficiaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular Assistance</td>
<td>188,517</td>
<td>138,096</td>
<td>326,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized Programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People receiving Handicapped Benefits</td>
<td>20,831</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People receiving Seniors Benefits</td>
<td>1,640</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People receiving Seniors Supplement</td>
<td>39,523</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families with OAS and Mixed Plan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in Home of Relative</td>
<td>3848</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 60-64 cases</td>
<td>5,340</td>
<td>1,441</td>
<td>6,781</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hardship Assistance Cases</td>
<td>27,844</td>
<td>12,231</td>
<td>40,075</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Assistance Workers</td>
<td>893</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Maintenance Workers</td>
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Cost

<table>
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<th>Fiscal 1993-1994</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approximately</td>
<td>$1.67 Billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Information obtained from "Program Inventory and Evaluation Framework", Research, Evaluation and Statistics Branch. Income Assistance Division. Province of British Columbia. Ministry of Social Services.**
Appendix II

The Ministry of Human Resources has undergone many changes in the last five years, and especially in the last year or so.

1. Have the changes affected the nature of your job? The way you do your job? How?

2. Which changes have had the greatest impact on your job? Why is that?

3. Have the changes affected your relations with clients? How?

4. Have the changes affected your relations with fellow workers? How?

5. Have the changes affected your relations with your supervisor? How?

6. Has the implementation of more computer technology affected your work as a Financial Assistance Worker? How?

7. How long have you worked as a Financial Assistance Worker?

8. Why did you choose this type of work?

9. What do you see as the future of the Income Assistance Program in B.C.?