



Gaining Ground in Illinois: Welfare Reform and Person-Centered Policy Analysis

Dan A. Lewis

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In 1997, then state Senator Barack Obama sponsored legislation in the Illinois General Assembly to study the newly passed federal welfare reform and how it would affect the citizens of Illinois. He believed that a sound piece of research assessing how the new law affected the poor of Illinois would give lawmakers a way to come together and improve the law and the lives of the poor. In the highly charged times of the 1990s when ideology often trumped pragmatism, the assumptions and values of policy makers often shaped their work much to the detriment of those affected by the policies.

Dan A. Lewis was selected to direct the study and report back to the legislature. For four years, Lewis and his team of researchers tracked a random group of 1,000 people who were on welfare when the new law went into effect. He reported on their income, their general well being, and the lives of their children under the new system. *Gaining Ground in Illinois* illuminates the findings of the study and offers advice for future policy makers. Lewis uses quantitative and qualitative data to draw clear conclusions but also to make the real experiences of the people he studied as vivid as possible. The reports allowed the legislature to debate the issue with the facts at hand.

Lewis seeks a middle ground to give us a picture of how welfare reform affected the poor and to give policy makers some direction in how to improve the lives of the poor moving forward. As the current economic crisis leads to more discussion of public aid and entitlements, Lewis's work offers a starting point for the discussion about the welfare of the people of Illinois. This study will be of interest to sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and policy makers who are concerned with the welfare of the poor and are looking for new directions in social policy that move beyond the tired debates of the last generation.

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