



Highlights of [GAO-04-921](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

About 49 million people, or 17 percent of the country's total population, live in rural communities, and 18 states have at least a third of their population in rural areas. Rural areas often have less favorable employment conditions than urban areas and have fewer public transportation options to help people get to and from work. Given these conditions and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program's emphasis on moving recipients into jobs and on the path toward self-sufficiency, some have questioned how welfare reform is working in rural areas. To inform discussions of these concerns, GAO is reporting on (1) the size and distribution of the rural TANF caseload and how the caseload's size has changed over time, (2) the challenges and strengths that rural TANF programs have in implementing welfare reform, (3) the strategies being used to address these challenges, and (4) what the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is doing to help rural areas address these challenges. To obtain this information, we used multiple methodologies, including analysis of county-level caseload data, as well as site visits, a review of studies on welfare reform in rural areas, and numerous interviews with caseworkers, government officials and other experts.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-921.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia M. Fagnoni, (202) 512-7215, or fagnonic@gao.gov.

WELFARE REFORM

Rural TANF Programs Have Developed Many Strategies to Address Rural Challenges

What GAO Found

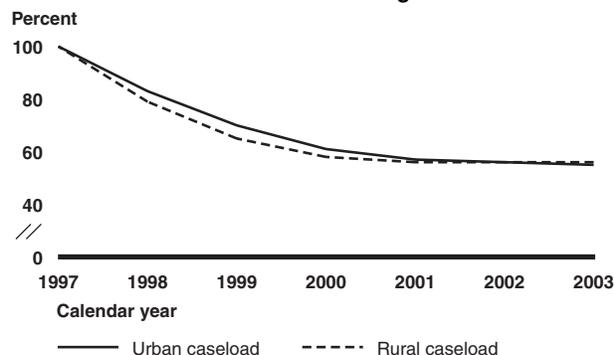
According to our analysis of 48 states, about 293,000 families living in rural counties received TANF cash assistance during an average month in 2003. Rural TANF families are about 14 percent of all TANF families, but the rural portion of individual states' TANF caseload ranges from 0.02 percent to 77 percent. Rural TANF families are concentrated in counties with disadvantaged conditions, including high unemployment and low median income. Since 1997, when welfare reform was implemented nationally, rural and urban TANF caseloads have declined by about the same amount—44 percent—when all reporting states' counties are aggregated.

The rural TANF caseworkers and service providers at sites we visited reported that transportation difficulties, job shortages, low wages, and lack of services, especially child care, challenged their efforts to help clients become employed and move toward self-sufficiency. However, they also cited strengths, including collaboration and personal attention to clients.

To address the challenges they face, the rural TANF programs we visited have employed a variety of strategies including nontraditional methods of connecting clients with services and cooperative arrangements that leverage resources. Some of the strategies adopted by rural TANF agencies take a more targeted approach, working to overcome one particular challenge or set of challenges that clients face, especially in the areas of transportation, employment, and child care.

The Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families has undertaken several efforts that could assist TANF programs and recipients in rural areas. These include rural conferences, a demonstration project, technical assistance to rural programs, and a rural task force with representatives from different programs, including TANF. Plans are under way for an Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) initiative targeting rural TANF recipients.

Rural and Urban TANF Caseload Changes between 1997 and 2003



Source: GAO analysis of data provided by 37 states on the average number of families receiving cash assistance under state TANF programs in each of the states' counties during months of 1997 through 2003.