

# Families in Focus: Moving Beyond Anecdotes

*Lessons from a 2010 Survey of Maine TANF Families*

## Key Findings

Over the last year, researchers at the University of New England (UNE) and the University of Maine at Orono (UMO) conducted an extensive study of TANF households in Maine. This work was commissioned by Maine Equal Justice Partners and the Maine Women's Lobby. Here are some key findings from that research.

1. Most TANF families are headed by women raising very young children on their own. 92% of survey respondents were women, reflecting the large majority of TANF families headed by women. Children in TANF families are typically very young—the median age of a child receiving TANF is just under two years old.
2. Most families receive assistance for a short time. The median length of time that families reported receiving TANF was 18 months.
3. Respondents have significant labor market experience. 97% of respondents have work experience with an average of three jobs in the past five years.
4. Wages are low for TANF families. The average wage for working respondents was \$8.36. This is only 4.5% higher than the average wage found in a survey of TANF families in 2001. By comparison Maine's average weekly wage for all workers increased by 20.3% during the same period—more than four times as much as the increase for TANF families.
5. Few TANF families receive child support regularly. Only 12% of all respondents that were due child support from an absent parent received it on a regular basis.
6. Higher levels of education reduce time on assistance. Nearly one-quarter of all respondents do not have high school diploma or a GED. Not surprisingly, those with higher educational levels received TANF for a shorter period of time.

7. A large number of TANF families lack access to transportation. Nearly 46% of all respondents did not own a vehicle. Of those, 80% had difficulty getting transportation when they needed it.
8. Lack of child care is a barrier to employment. 28% of respondents said that inability to find or afford child care caused them to turn to TANF. Nearly 60% of TANF families reported having work schedules that involved irregular hours that made it difficult to establish child care arrangements.
9. A large percentage of TANF families struggle with disability. Overall, 67% of all households had at least one family member with a disability. For families receiving assistance for more than 5 years, nearly 90% included a family member with a disability.
10. Housing costs put a large strain on TANF family budgets. Less than one-quarter of all respondents receive any form of rent subsidy. More than 81% of respondents said that they would not have a place to live if they didn't get help from TANF.
11. TANF families experience a high incidence of domestic violence. Nearly one-quarter of respondents reported applying for TANF because of an abusive relationship. National studies have found that over half of women receiving public assistance report experiencing domestic violence in their lifetimes.
12. TANF benefits are very low and have not increased since 2001. The maximum monthly TANF benefit for a family of three is \$485. This amount equals only 32% of the federal poverty level and is the lowest maximum TANF benefit in New England.