Welfare Reform Essay, Research Paper

One hotly contested aspect of the recent welfare debate is the unsubstantiated characterization of welfare recipients as having alcohol and drug problems, according to authors of a study published in the American Journal of Public Health. In their study, the authors present the most recent national estimates of alcohol and drug use, abuse and dependence among recipients in five social service programs. The primary objective was to identify high-risk groups within the welfare population in need of alcohol and drug prevention and treatment programs (Bridget F. Grant, PhD, and Deborah A. Dawson, PhD, “Alcohol and Drug Use, Abuse and Dependence among Welfare Recipients,” American Journal of Public Health, October 1996, Vol. 86, No. 10, p. 1450; “Welfare and Drugs,” USA Today, October 26, 1996, p. A3). The data in the study were collected in the 1992 National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey (NLAES) designed by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Data in the NLAES were collected in face-to-face interviews with one randomly selected respondent, 18 years of age or older, in each of 42,862 households in the United States. NLAES respondents were asked whether they received aid from any of five programs: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC); the Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); food stamps; supplemental security income (SSI); or Medicaid during the month before the interview.

Comparing rates between different races, gender and age groups helps define which subgroups within the welfare population are at greater risk of alcohol and drug abuse. Prevalence of heavy drinking and alcohol abuse/dependence was significantly greater for men than for women in each welfare program except AFDC. Drug use and abuse/dependence rates were about the same for each gender in all five programs. Rates for alcohol and drug use, abuse and dependence were not significantly different between non-Black and Black social service recipients. All alcohol and drug use and abuse rates were significantly higher for AFDC and food stamp recipients (but not WIC recipients) in the 18- to 34-year age group but not for the 35-years and older age group. For SSI and Medicaid recipients, alcohol and drug use and abuse rates were highest among 30- to 54-year olds.