



United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

Health, Education, and
Human Services Division

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June 14, 2000

The Honorable Daniel Patrick Moynihan
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Finance
United States Senate

Subject: Additional Information about the Scope and Limits of Sanction Data
Provided in Recent GAO Report on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Dear Senator Moynihan:

This letter is in response to your request for additional information about the scope and limits of data on sanctions provided in GAO's report, Welfare Reform: State Sanction Policies and Number of Families Affected (GAO/HEHS-00-44), issued March 31, 2000. In the TANF program, states must impose sanctions when adults do not comply with work or child support responsibilities.¹ States may choose to impose partial or full-family sanctions. Partial sanctions reduce cash benefits by less than 100 percent; for full-family sanctions, the entire cash benefit is terminated and cases are usually closed.²

Based on monthly data we received from the states, we determined that, in an average month during 1998, just over 23,000 TANF families nationwide had their benefits terminated as a result of full-family sanctions.³ To provide an indication of the extent of sanction activity, in general, the report also combines the number of families receiving a full-family sanction and the number of families under partial sanction in an average month in 1998. This letter responds to the following questions you raised concerning the number of full-family sanctions in an average month, and the figure we report combining full-family and partial sanctions.

¹States may also choose to impose sanctions for noncompliance with other program responsibilities.

²Full-family sanctions resulted in case closures in 45 of the 48 states that provided data on full-family sanctions for the report. Therefore, in 45 states, cases that received a full family sanction were no longer counted as part of the TANF caseload. In the 3 remaining states, cases that received a full-family sanction continued to be counted as part of the caseload, although they received no cash benefits.

³The report also provides the percentage of all TANF cases in which a full-family sanction was imposed in an average month in 1998, by state, as a basis to compare full-family sanction activity from state to state.

1) Can the number of full-family sanctions in an average month in 1998 be annualized and used to determine the impact full-family sanctions had that year on caseload size?

Under TANF, full-family sanctions can be imposed, and thus cases can be closed and reopened, multiple times in a year. Thus, annualizing the number of full-family sanctions in an average month, while providing an indication of the total number of times full-family sanctions were imposed in a year, would probably overstate the number of families who received full-family sanctions during that year and, thus, the impact of full-family sanctions on caseload size. An unduplicated count of families receiving full-family sanctions could not be derived from the data the states furnished to us. Developing an unduplicated count of all families whose cases were closed due to full-family sanctions in a given year would require substantial resources.

2) What constitutes the combined number of full-family and partial sanctions in an average month during 1998?

We calculated the total number of sanctions in an average month in 1998 by combining the number of full-family sanctions in an average month and the number of partial sanctions in an average month that year. However, in state automated data systems, case closures associated with full-family sanctions are recorded only in the month the action is taken to close the case. In contrast, benefit reductions associated with partial sanctions are recorded by states not only in the month action initiating a benefit reduction is taken, but also in each subsequent month that the benefit reduction remains in effect.⁴ As a result, a family that received a partial sanction in 1998 that remained in effect for 3 months, for example, appeared 3 times in a state's monthly numbers of partially sanctioned cases that year, while a family that received a full-family sanction was counted only in the month the case was closed due to full family sanction.

If you have any questions, please contact me on (202) 512-7215.

Sincerely yours,

Cynthia M. Fagnoni
Director, Education, Workforce, and
Income Security Issues

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⁴For most states, we were unable to distinguish between partial sanctions initiated and partial sanctions in effect in a given month.