



An Unanticipated Story of Caseload Declines

The First Two Years of the
Pathways Case Management System
in Oswego County, New York

**Suzanne L. Wagner
Charles Chang
Toby Herr**

ABOUT PROJECT MATCH

Founded in 1985, Project Match conducts program development and research activities in the fields of welfare-to-work and workforce development. Project Match's employment model for community-based organizations and its case management system for state and local welfare agencies have both been replicated at sites around the country. The program's research division uses data from replication sites, as well as from Project Match's own community-based employment program on Chicago's Near West Side, to explore the process by which poor Americans move toward economic and family stability.

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The Authors

Summary of the Key Findings

Oswego County was the first of 10 counties in New York State to use Project Match's Pathways Case Management System for welfare recipients; the system is also being used by welfare departments in several other sites around the country. To date, Oswego represents the largest implementation of the Pathway System in terms of the number of welfare recipients: about 2,000 people have been in Pathways there so far. This is because Oswego has used the system for a relatively long period of time—since January 1999—and because the county made the decision to use Pathways with all Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Safety Net (General Assistance) recipients, including adults on TANF who are exempt from the federal work requirement and those who are in sanction status.

Another important implementation decision in Oswego County was to make attendance at a Pathways monthly group meeting an eligibility requirement for all cash welfare recipients; missing a monthly meeting without good cause results in cancellation of the entire grant. The meeting eligibility requirement represents an effort on the part of the county to have regular and frequent contact with all adults receiving cash assistance, regardless of status, to ensure that they are getting the services and supports, and are engaged in the activities, that will help them make progress toward economic and family stability.

This paper focuses on participation and case closings for the 1,338 cash welfare recipients during the first two years of Pathways in Oswego County (January 1999 to December 2000). The most striking finding is that among the 1,338 welfare recipients, 72.2% were no longer receiving assistance at the end of the study period. Looking at TANF and Safety Net separately, each program had similarly striking closing rates: 70.7% for TANF and 75.8% for Safety Net.

The welfare recipients were not all assigned to Pathways at the same time: 68.7% were on the rolls at the time of Pathways implementation and assigned immediately; the rest were assigned as they came on the rolls at some point during the two-year study period. But if you take the number on the rolls at the time of implementation and compare it to the number on the rolls at the end of the study period, Oswego had a

caseload decline during those two years of 59.5%. This is a much higher caseload decline than in several other upstate New York counties, in the state as a whole, or in the nation during the same period, when declines ranged from 21% to 27%.

The distribution of reasons for case closings, as documented in the state welfare management information system (MIS), was quite different for TANF and Safety Net recipients. Among TANF recipients, the most common reason for case closings was noncompliance with eligibility requirements: 24.3% of the closings were for noncompliance with the Pathways monthly meeting eligibility requirement, while 10.6% were for noncompliance with other, non-Pathways eligibility requirements, together accounting for 34.9% of all closings.

Income accounted for 21.5% of the TANF case closings: 13.5% closed because of earned income, 0.5% closed because of Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and 7.5% closed because of unearned income other than SSI.

The remaining 43.8% of the TANF closings were due to a range of reasons, including no eligible children in the household, moving out of the county, and client request.

Safety Net closings present a different picture. The greatest number of closings for this group were due to unearned income: SSI was the reason for 15.1% of the closings and unearned income other than SSI was the reason for 27.9% of the closings, together accounting for 43% of all Safety Net closings. Only 1% of the Safety Net closings occurred because of earned income.

Compared to TANF recipients, the Safety Net group was more compliant with eligibility requirements: 13.4% of cases closed because of noncompliance with the Pathways meeting requirement and 5.7% closed because of noncompliance with other, non-Pathways eligibility requirements. However, unlike TANF recipients in New York State, Safety Net recipients can lose their entire grant because of a sanction for noncompliance with the work requirement, and 14.4% of the Safety Net closings in Oswego were because of a sanction. Thus, if we consider noncompliance of every type possible for Safety Net recipients—whether with eligibility or work requirements—a full 33.5% of the Oswego Safety Net closings represent an unwillingness or inability to cooperate with the system.

The remaining 22.4% of Safety Net closings occurred for a range of reasons, including client request and moving from the county.

The pace of case closings during the first two years of Pathways in Oswego County was also notable. Most of the people who left welfare after being assigned to Pathways did so relatively quickly. About 80% of all the closings during the study period occurred within six months of being assigned to Pathways. A similar pace of closings is evident for all the subgroups examined in the study. Whether a person was on TANF or Safety Net, whether a person was already receiving cash assistance at the time of Pathways implementation or came on the rolls after, whether a person left because of earned income, SSI, or noncompliance, the closings usually occurred within six months of assignment to Pathways.

An analysis of people's monthly activities while in Pathways indicates that the state MIS data may understate the number of welfare recipients who left the rolls because of employment. Among TANF recipients who left the rolls, for example, about 50% worked at some point while in Pathways. This percentage far exceeds the percentage of TANF cases that, according to state MIS data, closed because of earnings (13.5%). Since noncompliance, client request, and some of the other closing reasons in the state MIS may in reality represent employment—for example, a person got a job and, instead of reporting it to the welfare agency, just stopped coming to the monthly Pathways meeting—it is impossible to know from the MIS data the exact number of case closings in Oswego County that occurred because people were working. In fact, when looking at the activities for TANF recipients whose case was closed because of noncompliance with the Pathways meeting requirement, about 30% had employment in their monthly plans at some point while in Pathways. This finding suggests that some of the noncompliance was probably motivated by people's no longer needing or wanting welfare because they had a job.

I. Introduction

Oswego County was the first of 10 counties in New York State to use Project Match's Pathways Case Management System for welfare recipients; the system is also being used by welfare departments in several other sites around the country. To date, Oswego represents the largest implementation of the Pathways System in terms of the number of welfare recipients: about 2,000 people have been in Pathways there so far. This is because Oswego has used the system for a relatively long period of time—since January 1999—and because the county made the decision to use Pathways with all Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Safety Net (General Assistance) recipients, including adults on TANF who are exempt from the federal work requirement and those who are in sanction status.

This report focuses on participation and case closings for the 1,338 cash welfare recipients during the first two years of Pathways in Oswego County (January 1999 to December 2000). Because Oswego uses Pathways with all its cash welfare recipients, there is no control or comparison group in the county against which to measure the findings, although we compare the findings to trends during the same period of time in similar New York State counties and also at the state and national levels.

II. Description of the Pathways Case Management System

The Pathways Case Management System was developed by Project Match specifically for state and local welfare agencies, to be used in a mandatory setting. Though based on the same principles of human development, the Pathways System is separate and distinct from the voluntary community-based employment program that Project Match has operated in Chicago since 1985.

The goal of Pathways is to restructure interactions between caseworkers and welfare recipients to ensure that recipients do not get “stuck” in one place, but make progress each month toward economic and family stability. A key principle of Pathways is that economic and family stability can mean something different for each welfare recipient. In regard to economic stability, it might mean working full-time and leaving welfare, or combining part-time work with welfare, or transferring to another government program

such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI). In regard to family stability, it might mean ending an abusive relationship or, in different cases, getting married; it might mean getting a child treatment for a chronic medical condition or enrolling a child in school enrichment activities; or it might mean moving to a better apartment or a safer neighborhood.

The Pathways System has four components that provide the tools to restructure caseworker–welfare recipient interactions: an activity diary, a monthly group meeting, a computerized tracking system, and a set of protocols and rules for agency staff and clients.

The activity diary that Pathways participants receive each month includes space for up to four different activities a participant agrees to do. A central part of the diary is the menu of activities, some of them countable toward the federal work requirement and some of them not countable. The menu includes standard work-prep activities such as job-readiness classes, job search, community work experience, and vocational education, as well as treatment activities such as domestic violence counseling and substance abuse programs. It also includes child-related activities (e.g., taking children to extracurricular activities, going to school conferences, establishing paternity), personal activities (e.g., going to medical appointments, attending a support group), housing and financial activities (e.g., finding a Section 8 apartment, clearing a debt), and other types of activities that, when structured around a schedule and monitored, can serve as stepping-stones to economic and family stability. Welfare agencies that implement the Pathways System must include a broad range of activities in the diary that goes beyond the standard work-prep activities, though they can add or remove specific activities.

Considering such a range of activities as legitimate steps in the welfare-to-work process has long been a principle of Project Match’s developmental approach to working with welfare recipients. The principle is illustrated in the Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence, the earliest version of which was first circulated by Project Match in 1991.¹ (A recent version is shown on the following page.) On the ladder, each type of activity finds a place—some on the lower rungs, others on the upper rungs—and

¹Toby Herr and Robert Halpern, *Changing What Counts: Rethinking the Journey Out of Welfare* (Chicago: Project Match, 1991).

The Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence

Unsubsidized Job Full-time	Unsubsidized Job Full-time	Unsubsidized Job Part-time	Subsidized Job Full-time	Subsidized Job Part-time	Internship with Stipend 1-20 Hours/Week
Family-Supporting Wage Over 5 Years 4-5 Years 1-3 Years	Entry-Level Wage Over 1 Year 7-12 Months 4-6 Months 0-3 Months	7-12 Months 4-6 Months 0-3 Months	7-12 Months 4-6 Months 0-3 Months	7-12 Months 4-6 Months 0-3 Months	Structured Activity (e.g., WIC Clerk, Head Start Aide) 7-12 Months 4-6 Months 0-3 Months
More Than 20 Hours/Week	More Than 20 Hours/Week	More Than 20 Hours/Week	11-20 Hours/Week	6-10 Hours/Week	1-5 Hours/Week
Little League Coach Local Hospital Community Development Board	College On-the-Job Training	Vocational Training Voc. Rehab. Program	GED Class Self-Employment Course	Domestic Violence Support Group Substance Abuse Treatment Money Management Class	Exercise Class Medical Appointment Individual Counseling Court Hearing
More Than 10 Hours/Week	More Than 10 Hours/Week	More Than 10 Hours/Week	11-20 Hours/Week	6-10 Hours/Week	1-5 Hours/Week
Take Child to Juvenile Probation Activities Take Child to Tutoring or Homework Assistance Program	Homeroom Mother Scout Leader Neighborhood Safety Organization	Local School Council Tenant Management Board Child's School	Local School Council Tenant Management Board Child's School	Local School Council Tenant Management Board Child's School	Food Pantry Church Head Start
6-10 Hours/Week	6-10 Hours/Week	6-10 Hours/Week	6-10 Hours/Week	6-10 Hours/Week	6-10 Hours/Week
Attend Family Counseling Take Child to Extracurricular Activities (e.g., Scouts, Little League, Music Class)	Scheduled Hours 11-20 Hours/Week	Scheduled Hours 6-10 Hours/Week	Scheduled Hours 6-10 Hours/Week	Scheduled Hours 6-10 Hours/Week	Scheduled Hours 6-10 Hours/Week
1-5 Hours/Week	1-5 Hours/Week	1-5 Hours/Week	1-5 Hours/Week	1-5 Hours/Week	1-5 Hours/Week
Take Child to Medical Appointment Go to School Conference Register Child for Head Start	Unscheduled Hours 1-5 Hours/Week	Unscheduled Hours 1-5 Hours/Week	Unscheduled Hours 1-5 Hours/Week	Unscheduled Hours 1-5 Hours/Week	Unscheduled Hours 1-5 Hours/Week
Child-Focused Activities	Volunteer Activities (Community Service)	Employment	Education/Training Activities	Self-Improvement Activities	

they are arranged so that they are progressively more demanding. Including this range of activities guarantees that there is a place on the ladder for every welfare recipient to start, as well as flexibility for customizing a pathway off welfare. Besides taking into account variation in skills and competencies among welfare recipients, the different types and levels of activities represent the many different roles that welfare recipients must learn to balance: among them, worker, parent, partner, and community member. In Project Match's experience, the ability to balance these competing roles is often the characteristic that distinguishes successful clients.

Broadening the types of activities allowed in employability plans has become a much discussed issue as Congress debates reauthorization of the TANF legislation in 2002,² particularly since there is a widely supported movement to increase the number of hours that a TANF recipient must spend each week in activities that meet the work requirement. Pathways has always included a broad range of activities in the diary, even though some of them do not count toward the work requirement. With reauthorization, there is the possibility that many of the currently uncountable activities will become countable, as policymakers recognize how they can contribute to individual and family progress. Tommy Thompson, the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has endorsed broadening the types of countable activities. Of the 40 hours to be spent each week in countable activities, he has said in reference to President Bush's proposal for reform, only 24 would have to be used for employment, on-the-job training, or workfare, while the other 16 could be used for training and education, and "if a parent wanted to spend 5 of the 16 hours going to school with a child, so be it. That could qualify."³ Broadening the types of countable activities would also give welfare agencies a greater ability to create plans that will meet a 35- or 40-hour weekly work requirement: with the current list of countable activities, it would be difficult to fill that many hours, even for welfare recipients who are working, since many don't work full-time.

The centerpiece of Pathways is the monthly group meeting, which in most sites around the country is run by a team of welfare caseworkers and employment workers.

²See, for example, Sharon Parrott, Wendell Primus, and Shawn Fremstad, "Administration's TANF Proposals Would Limit—Not Increase—State Flexibility" (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 18, 2002).

³Robert Pear, "House G.O.P. Acts to Ease Bush Welfare Plan," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2002.

Each participant gets fifteen minutes to review his or her prior month's plan (which is recorded in the diary) and to negotiate a new plan for the coming month; the new plan builds on recent accomplishments and changing circumstances. The monthly meeting ensures that caseworkers have regular contact with everyone on their caseload and that no one slips between the cracks.

The technological backbone of Pathways is a computerized tracking system that captures information from the activity diaries and monthly group meetings. The system generates a cumulative record of each person's monthly plans, successes, and setbacks. Staff are supposed to use these data at monthly case review meetings to gauge participant progress and inform decision making. The tracking system can also produce for each participant an easy-to-read copy of his or her own cumulative record.

The final component consists of the protocols and rules that guide Pathways operations. This component includes such things as procedures for running monthly group meetings, policies about sanctioning participants, and guidelines about which agency staff, aside from Pathways staff, should attend monthly case reviews (e.g., child-welfare staff, child-support staff). The welfare agency implementing Pathways works with Project Match to customize and refine these protocols and rules to be in accord with its specific policies and regulations.

To fully implement Pathways requires considerable changes for welfare agencies and workers. First, which pathway an individual takes is determined not just by easily identifiable characteristics, but also by level of effort and motivation as evidenced through behavior. With other approaches, work-prep activities are usually determined by personal characteristics. Someone who lacks a high school diploma or GED certificate, for instance, might automatically be assigned to an education or training program if he or she fails to get a job through up-front job search. In Pathways, assignments are not automatic. There would first be a discussion with the welfare recipient about whether he or she wants to pursue education or training and, if not, what the other options are for fulfilling the work requirement. Say the recipient does decide on an education program. At subsequent meetings, the Pathways team would use all the indicators available to gauge whether the education program was indeed the right choice. Is the recipient attending the program regularly? Is he or she meeting the requirements of the course? If

so, the course remains part of the plan. If not, the plan is renegotiated. In Pathways, plans are evaluated every month using actual behavior as a guide.

Second, Pathways staff are asked not to see their role as that of an expert who knows what is best for the welfare recipient, but as a facilitator who helps the welfare recipient set priorities and make good decisions at each step. In training caseworkers around the country for Pathways, we have seen that their prior training and responsibilities have made them more likely to tell welfare recipients what to do, rather than to listen to recipients' concerns and interests and then lay out the options, including the costs and benefits of choosing one option over another. We have found that doing the latter is more likely to foster active decision making on the part of welfare recipients, to instill in them a sense of responsibility for the outcome of the decision, and to communicate respect for them.

Take, for example, the case of Jim, a General Assistance recipient with 27 years of substance abuse to overcome. When he came to his first Pathways group meeting, he was about to be sanctioned off General Assistance for failing to attend his outpatient treatment program, which he said he didn't like. What he expected to hear from the Pathways team was, "You have to go or you'll lose your grant." What he got instead were questions about why he wasn't going to the program and a discussion about treatment options in the area. As it turned out, the options were pretty limited and didn't offer anything very different from Jim's current program, but the team suggested that maybe there were ways to improve his experience in that program. The caseworker intended to talk to the appropriate person at the treatment program, but Jim himself took the initiative, and by the next Pathways meeting he announced to the group, "I'm back in the program, but this time it's going to be different." He said that he had finally decided to start talking in the group therapy sessions, which led to his getting a program sponsor for the first time—something that was very important to him. Apparently the discussion in the previous Pathways meeting had helped Jim realize that his treatment could progress differently and that he could play a role in changing its direction.

The concept of simultaneity is the third important way that Pathways is different from traditional approaches. In Pathways, a welfare recipient would rarely have just one activity as part of the monthly plan. Whenever possible for an individual, the plan

includes an activity that will meet the work requirement, but it is also likely to include one or more activities to address personal or family concerns raised during the meeting, so that welfare recipients become accustomed to juggling responsibilities in all areas of their life. Thus, a monthly plan might include going to a job club, following up on a referral to a doctor for a chronic cough, and arranging a meeting with a school administrator to discuss why a child's learning disability has not been sufficiently addressed.

Fourth, in identifying activities and resources that will help keep welfare recipients and their families moving forward, Pathways staff are asked to go beyond those available through the agency and its established network of service providers. Quite often issues arise during monthly meetings that the agency is not prepared to address—someone wants to join a breast cancer support group, for example, or needs help navigating the juvenile justice system. For the traditional welfare caseworker, locating these kinds of resources may not be part of the job since they fall outside the system's purview, but in Pathways it is part of the job.

And finally, a word about what Pathways is *not*. It is not a job search program, a life skills class, a treatment program, or any other discrete activity or service that a welfare agency might offer. Rather, it is a case management system for selecting, coordinating, and monitoring activities and services. To use an analogy from the field of education, Pathways serves a "homeroom" function, a place for regular and frequent check-in where ongoing assessment and planning take place and where guidance, feedback, and support are available. When the "bell rings," everyone heads off to their own activities and services—just as students head off to their own schedule of classes—though they will soon gather together again to touch base.

III. Background on Oswego County

Demographic and Economic Profile

Oswego County is a primarily rural county in central New York State, about 35 miles north of Syracuse. It has a population of approximately 124,000 and its two cities are Oswego and Fulton. Government, retail trade, transportation, communications, and

public utilities are major employers in the region, and dairy farming and food processing are also important sectors of the area’s economy.

During the two years covered in this study, Oswego County’s unemployment rate was higher than New York State’s, which in turn was higher than the national average.

Unemployment Rate	Oswego County	New York State	United States
1999	6.4%	5.2%	4.2%
2000	6.3%	4.6%	4.0%
Two-year average	6.35%	4.9%	4.1%

Nevertheless, administrators in the Oswego County Department of Social Services felt that the county was sharing in the nation’s strong economy and that there were jobs available for welfare recipients, in Oswego County and in neighboring counties that are relatively accessible.

Pathways Implementation

Decision to Adopt Pathways. In 1998, Oswego County’s welfare department was awarded a TANF-funded grant by the state to develop and implement a case management model. Mike Warner, a staff member in the state’s Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance in Albany, recommended that the county look at the Pathways System, which he had heard about at a regional conference. Oswego subsequently invited Project Match to make a presentation about Pathways and soon thereafter signed a contract with Project Match for training and implementation assistance. According to Chris Weaver, coordinator of client services in Oswego County’s welfare department, administrators there had been looking for “a complete case management system, one that would ensure the agency met with every client every month and that monitored progress.” More specifically, they wanted to implement a structured process whereby every cash welfare recipient would be seen monthly, a customized plan would be developed or revised, and there would be monthly follow-up on the plan.

Implementation Decisions. Oswego decided to use the Pathways System with *all* adult TANF and Safety Net recipients in the county,⁴ including those on TANF who are exempt from the federal work requirement or who are in sanction status.⁵ Relatedly, Oswego decided that, to maintain eligibility for a grant, all adult recipients—even those who are exempt or in sanction status—must attend a Pathways monthly group meeting. If they do not attend a monthly meeting without good cause, the entire grant, including the child’s portion, is canceled. This eligibility requirement was legally challenged, though the policy was upheld,⁶ and all other counties in New York using Pathways have also made group-meeting attendance an eligibility requirement. The requirement represents an effort to engage all adults receiving cash assistance, regardless of status, so that appropriate and beneficial services and supports can be provided to them.

In Oswego County, administrators decided that both welfare and employment staff should be on the Pathways teams, which facilitate the monthly group meetings, conduct regular case reviews, and fulfill other Pathways responsibilities. As in many other sites where the welfare and employment responsibilities are separated, this arrangement has resulted in improved coordination and collaboration between the two types of workers.

Oswego participants cannot be sanctioned for not fulfilling *any* part of the plan recorded in their monthly activity diary; they can be sanctioned only for not fulfilling that part of the plan that represents the official work requirement as defined by federal and state policies. (And, of course, participants who are exempt from the work requirement cannot be sanctioned at all.) As noted earlier in regard to TANF in New York State, a sanction results only in removal of the adult portion of the grant, never the child’s

⁴Adults caring for children on child-only TANF cases are not themselves TANF recipients, so they are not required to participate in Pathways, nor are they invited to participate voluntarily. Please note that, in this report, the term *child-only case* refers to cases that, when opened, include only children; the term does not refer to full-family cases in which the adult portion of the grant has been removed because of a sanction.

⁵Adults in sanction status have lost their portion of the TANF grant because they have not complied with the work requirement; in New York State, the child’s portion of a TANF grant can never be removed because of a sanction.

⁶Oswego County’s decision to make Pathways meeting attendance a condition of eligibility falls under Regulation 18 NYCRR 351.2, 351.8(A)(2), and 351.21(A) of the Official Compilation of Codes, Rules, and Regulations of the State of New York. This section states, “In addition to the eligibility interview, an applicant/recipient can be required to meet with agency staff to discuss possible employment opportunities, or other resources, that may reduce or eliminate the need for public assistance.” Based on this regulation, a case can be closed for failure to attend such a required meeting. The county argued that the purpose of the Pathways meeting is to discuss resources that may reduce or eliminate the need for public assistance and therefore the meeting falls under the regulation.

portion, and sanctioned individuals in Oswego County are still required to attend the Pathways monthly group meeting in order to maintain eligibility for the child's portion.

IV. Demographic Profile of Oswego Welfare Recipients

As shown in Table 1, 84.1% of the cash welfare recipients in Oswego County during the study period were white. Safety Net recipients were older on average than TANF recipients (40 and 30 years old, respectively). Among TANF recipients, about a quarter were married (i.e., a two-parent case), while the rest were single parents. Not unexpectedly, almost all Safety Net recipients were single.

Whether on TANF or Safety Net, most recipients were either high school dropouts or had nothing more than a high school diploma or GED, although the level of educational attainment was not available for a fair number of recipients in the data provided by Oswego County for this report.

Also, data were not available to determine the length of the current welfare spell or the total amount of time on welfare. However, we do know that 68.7% of recipients were already on welfare at the time that Pathways was implemented in Oswego County, while 31.3% came on the rolls after Pathways was implemented. This distinction is important, since new recipients—whether coming on the rolls for the first time or returning after a period off welfare—would not experience the sudden shift to a new set of expectations under Pathways, which might affect their response to the case management system.

V. Case Closings Among Oswego Welfare Recipients

Caseload Declines

Perhaps the most striking finding from Oswego County is that among the 1,338 cash welfare recipients assigned to Pathways during the two-year study period, 72.2% of them were no longer receiving assistance at the end of the study period (see Table 2). Looking at TANF and Safety Net separately, each program had similarly striking closing rates: 70.7% for TANF and 75.8% for Safety Net. Further, there was little welfare cycling

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Pathways Participants in
Oswego County, New York
(January 1999–December 2000)

Characteristic	All Participants	TANF Participants Only	Safety Net Participants Only
Race/ethnicity			
White	84.1%	82.5%	87.8%
African American	1.4%	1.2%	2.0%
Latino	2.4%	2.4%	2.3%
Native American	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%
Other	1.9%	2.3%	1.0%
Unknown	10.0%	11.3%	6.9%
Age			
16–20	8.8%	10.3%	5.3%
21–25	20.9%	26.2%	8.1%
26–30	19.9%	24.7%	8.4%
31–40	28.7%	28.9%	28.3%
41–50	14.9%	8.7%	30.0%
Over 50	6.7%	1.3%	19.9%
Average age	33	30	40
Marital status			
Never married	56.9%	54.0%	63.9%
Married	20.1%	24.3%	9.9%
Separated	13.1%	13.3%	12.5%
Divorced	8.4%	7.0%	12.0%
Abandoned	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%
Widowed	0.9%	0.6%	1.5%
Unknown	0.5%	0.5%	0.3%
Educational attainment			
High school dropout	36.5%	34.7%	40.7%
High school diploma or GED	40.4%	38.7%	44.5%
Associate's degree	0.4%	0.3%	0.5%
Bachelor's degree	0.1%	0.0%	0.3%
Graduate degree	0.2%	0.0%	0.5%
Unknown	22.5%	26.2%	13.5%
On welfare at the time of Pathways implementation			
Yes	68.7%	72.6%	59.3%
No	31.3%	27.4%	40.7%
Total Participants	1,338	945	393

Source: Project Match calculations based on data provided by Oswego County, from the state MIS and the Pathways tracking system.

Note: Distributions may not add to 100.0% because of rounding.

Table 2
Case Closings Among Pathways Participants in
Oswego County, New York
(January 1999–December 2000)

Status as of December 2000	All Participants	TANF Participants Only	Safety Net Participants Only
No longer receiving cash assistance	72.2%	70.7%	75.8%
Still receiving cash assistance	27.8%	29.3%	24.2%
Total Participants	1,338	945	393

Source: Project Match calculations based on data provided by Oswego County, from the state MIS and the Pathways tracking system.

Note: Distributions may not add to 100.0% because of rounding.

during the two years: most people who left the rolls stayed off (figures not shown in the table).

The welfare recipients, of course, did not all enter Pathways at the same time: 68.7% were on the rolls at the time of implementation; the rest came on at some point during the two-year study period. But if you take the number on the rolls at the time of implementation—the beginning of the study period—and compare it to the number on the rolls two years later—the end of the study period—Oswego County had a caseload decline during those years of 59.5%.

Given the lack of a comparison or control group, it is impossible to know exactly how much of this decline was due to Pathways, though a comparison to declines elsewhere during the same period of time supports the notion that something unique was happening in Oswego. In New York State as a whole from January 1999 to December 2000, the decline in TANF and Safety Net caseloads was 22.2%,⁷ far lower than in Oswego County, and the national decline in TANF cases was about 22% during the two-year period (we were not able to obtain data on the national decline in General Assistance cases).⁸ And remember, New York State and the nation as a whole both had lower unemployment rates than Oswego County during the study period.

Other rural counties in New York—which probably are better yardsticks against which to measure than state or national data—also saw declines much smaller than those in Oswego. Rockland County saw a decline in TANF and Safety Net of 26.1% during the two-year period; Herkimer County had a decline of 26.9%; and Chautauqua County's decline was 21.3%.⁹ In all three counties, the unemployment rate was lower than in Oswego.

While all of these local, state, and national caseload declines are noteworthy in the context of welfare reform, they don't come close to Oswego's decline.

⁷Data provided by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

⁸TANF data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁹Data provided by county administrators. Rockland, Herkimer, and Chautauqua Counties all now use Pathways, though Pathways would not have had an effect on declines during the two-year period for this study: Rockland did not start Pathways until early 2002, Herkimer did not start until the end of October 2000, and Chautauqua started in April 2001.

Reasons for Case Closings

Table 3 provides a breakdown of the reasons for case closings during the study period, based on data from the New York State welfare management information system (MIS). While the table shows reasons for closings for all Pathways participants, it is important to separate out TANF and Safety Net in this case, because the distributions look quite different for the two groups.

TANF Closings. Among Pathways participants on TANF, the most common reason for closing a case was noncompliance with eligibility requirements. (As noted earlier, TANF eligibility requirements are distinct from TANF work requirements: noncompliance with eligibility requirements results in cancellation of the entire grant, while in New York State at least, noncompliance with work requirements does not result in cancellation, since there are no full-family TANF sanctions in the state; only the adult portion of the grant is removed for noncompliance with TANF work requirements.) A full 34.9% of the TANF closings were for noncompliance with eligibility requirements, and most of these (about two-thirds) were for noncompliance with the eligibility requirement to attend the Pathways monthly group meeting, in contrast to noncompliance with other, non-Pathways eligibility requirements of the welfare agency.

While no one knows exactly why people did not comply with the meeting eligibility requirement, the general sense in Oswego among the Pathways staff is that many of them actually had other income on which they could rely and that was unreported. In other words, the requirement that welfare recipients attend a monthly face-to-face meeting with welfare staff may have “smoked out” a fair number of people, and this smoke-out effect might also account for the relatively high percentage of TANF recipients (16.9%) who actively requested that their case be closed during the study period.

Of course, there is always the worry that truly vulnerable families lost their grant—families that have no other source of income and are so troubled that it’s impossible even to make it to the monthly meeting. Again, no one can be certain, but Oswego staff feel that this sort of “involuntary” noncompliance was not happening to a significant degree. Administrators there note that a 10-day closing notice is sent out prior to the actual closing and if the person contacts the agency within those 10 days and agrees to comply

Table 3
Welfare Case Closings Among Pathways Participants in
Oswego County, New York,
by Reason for Closing
(January 1999–December 2000)

Reason for Closing	All Closings	TANF Closings Only	Safety Net Closings Only
Earned income	9.6%	13.5%	1.0%
SSI	5.0%	0.5%	15.1%
Unearned income other than SSI	13.8%	7.5%	27.9%
Noncompliance with eligibility requirements	30.0%	34.9%	19.1%
Noncompliance with eligibility requirement to attend Pathways monthly meeting	20.9%	24.3%	13.4%
Noncompliance with non-Pathways eligibility requirements	9.1%	10.6%	5.7%
No eligible individual in household^a	5.4%	1.4%	14.4%
Failure to recertify	4.5%	4.2%	5.0%
Moved/unable to locate	7.0%	7.9%	5.0%
Recipient request	13.7%	16.9%	6.4%
Added to another case	0.8%	1.1%	0.3%
Other reasons	10.3%	12.3%	5.7%
Total Case Closings	966	668	298

Source: Project Match calculations based on data provided by Oswego County, from the state MIS and the Pathways tracking system.

Notes: Distributions may not add to 100.0% because of rounding.

^aFor TANF recipients, the MIS code for this category is used when there is no longer an eligible child in the household. For Safety Net recipients, the MIS code for this category is used when a case is closed because of a sanction, which cannot happen to TANF recipients, since New York State does not have full-family TANF sanctions. Thus, the code for this category has neutral connotations for TANF recipients, but negative connotations for Safety Net recipients, since it is linked to sanctioning.

with the eligibility requirement, the case is not closed. Also, if a welfare recipient does not show up at his or her first scheduled Pathways meeting without good cause, the welfare agency automatically gives the person a second chance, scheduling him or her for another meeting.

There are suggestions in the Oswego data that noncompliance with the meeting eligibility requirement is more common among welfare recipients who experience the shift to a new set of expectations under Pathways: the rate of closings for noncompliance with the meeting requirement was about two percentage points higher for TANF recipients who were already on the rolls at the time of Pathways implementation than for those who came on the rolls after implementation (24.8% versus 22.8%). Further, the rate of closings because of a recipient's request—which in some cases represents the recipient's decision to leave welfare because he or she is unwilling to meet the agency's requirements—was almost twice as high among those who were on the rolls prior to Pathways implementation than for those who came on the rolls after (19.4% versus 10.3%). Of course, for people who applied for welfare after implementation, Pathways expectations may have played a “diversion” function, causing some people who didn't want to comply to decide not to go on the rolls at all and thereby leading to the somewhat higher level of compliance among those who came on the rolls after implementation.

After all this discussion about noncompliance, it's important to remember that not all TANF closings in Oswego County were because of it. Income did account for almost a quarter of the closings: 13.5% closed because of earned income, 0.5% closed because of SSI, and 7.5% closed because of unearned income other than SSI. The remainder of the TANF closings (43.8%) were due to a range of reasons, including no eligible children in the household, client request, and moving out of the county (see Table 3). Altogether, then, 65.3% of TANF case closings occurred for reasons other than noncompliance with eligibility requirements of any sort (i.e., both Pathways and non-Pathways eligibility requirements) and 75.9% of TANF case closings occurred for reasons other than noncompliance specifically with the Pathways meeting eligibility requirement.

Safety Net Closings. Safety Net closings present a very different picture (see Table 3). The greatest number of closings were due to unearned income: SSI was the reason

for 15.1% of the closings and unearned income other than SSI was the reason for 27.9% of the closings, together accounting for 43% of all Safety Net closings.

Compared to TANF recipients, the Safety Net group was more compliant with eligibility requirements: 13.4% of cases were closed because of noncompliance with the Pathways meeting requirement and 5.7% were closed because of noncompliance with other eligibility requirements. However, unlike TANF recipients in New York, Safety Net recipients can lose their entire grant because of a sanction for noncompliance with the work requirement, and 14.4% of the Safety Net closings in Oswego were because of a sanction (see Table 3, “No eligible individual in household,” the MIS category used for Safety Net closings because of a sanction). Thus, if we consider noncompliance of every type possible for Safety Net recipients—whether with eligibility or work requirements—a full 33.5% of the Oswego Safety Net closings represent an unwillingness or inability to cooperate with the system.

It is notable that almost no Safety Net recipients had a case closed because of earned income (only 1%). While some closings in other MIS categories might in reality be because of a job—for example, noncompliance or a recipient’s request to close the case sometimes occur because of a job—administrators and caseworkers in New York believe that Safety Net recipients are unlikely to go to work, because they tend to suffer from serious physical and mental health problems, even though many are not eligible for SSI. Also, some Oswego staff believe that Safety Net recipients are sometimes less motivated to seek work because they don’t have a family to support, but are responsible only for themselves.

A Note About Differences Between TANF and Safety Net Recipients. The differences we see in the reasons for case closings between TANF and Safety Net recipients reinforce the notion that these are two quite different populations. As of December 1, 2001, however, TANF recipients in New York State began to hit the five-year time limit, and many of them are being rolled over into the Safety Net program. As a consequence, aggregate Safety Net data are likely to look very different in the future. One simple recommendation we have at this point for state and county administrators is to carefully maintain the distinction between “original” Safety Net recipients and “rollover” Safety Net recipients, not only in data collection but also in analysis and

presentation: any aggregate data for Safety Net after December 1, 2001, will mask important subgroup stories that might be critical to decisions around policy and practice.

The Pace of Case Closings

Figure 1 depicts the rate of case closings for Pathways participants in relation to the number of monthly group meetings attended,¹⁰ and it appears that most of the people who left welfare after being assigned to Pathways did so relatively quickly.

Almost 25% of the recipients who left the rolls never attended even one meeting. Some of these cases would have closed naturally at the time, in the absence of Pathways: for example, almost a quarter of the closings for earned income occurred before attending a first meeting (not shown in the figure).

Most welfare recipients in Oswego County did attend at least one meeting, however, and about 55% of all the closings during the study period occurred among people who attended from one to six meetings. The remaining 20% of the closings occurred among people who attended more than six, though the proportions dwindle as the number of meetings attended increases.

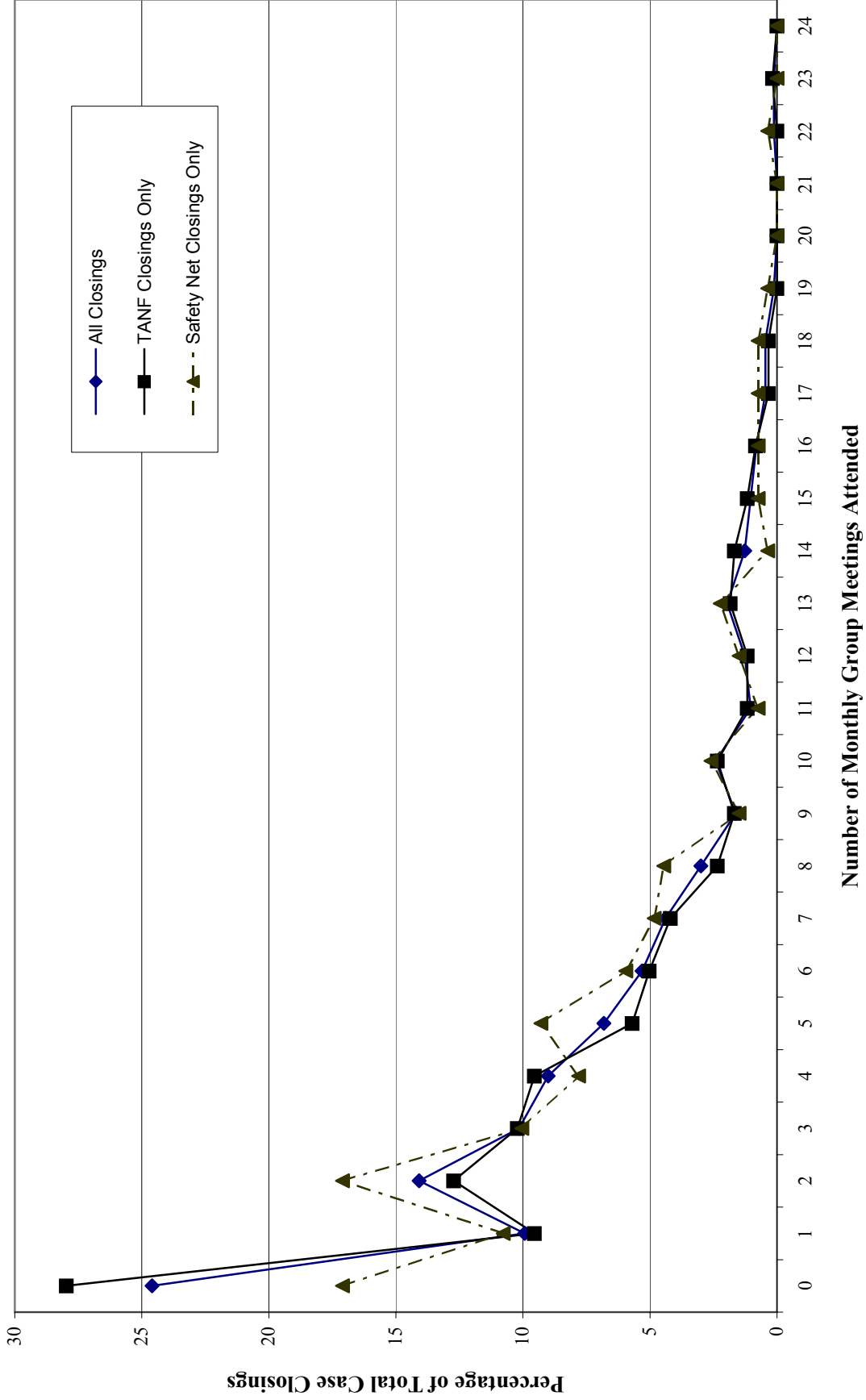
A similar pattern of closings is evident for all the subgroups we examined. Whether a participant was on TANF or Safety Net, whether a participant was already receiving cash assistance at the time of Pathways implementation or came on the rolls after, whether a participant left because of earned income, SSI, or noncompliance, most of the closings occurred within six meetings.

This doesn't mean that people who are in Pathways for a long period of time never leave welfare. There were 121 people in the study sample who attended more than 12 meetings (only 9% of the sample), and 55 of these cases (45.5%) did eventually close during the study period. Interestingly, only three of these cases closed because of noncompliance with the Pathways meeting requirement; this finding suggests that the small group of long-staying Pathways participants is relatively cooperative, willing at least to keep coming to their monthly meetings. The reasons for the remainder of the

¹⁰In most cases, the number of meetings attended is equivalent to the number of months in Pathways; in some cases, however, a participant may have missed a meeting with good cause, so the number of meetings attended would be less than the number of months in Pathways.

Figure 1

**Rate of Case Closings for Pathways Participants,
by Number of Monthly Group Meetings Attended**



Source: Project Match calculations based on data provided by Oswego County, from the state MIS and the Pathways tracking system.

closings in this long-staying group cover the spectrum, though the more common are SSI approval and client request.

VI. Monthly Activities During Pathways Participation

Table 4 shows the types of activities that made up welfare recipients' monthly plans over the course of their participation in Pathways (the data are visually depicted in Figure 2). The types of activities are (1) employment, (2) "upper-rung" activities (e.g., job search, education/training, work experience—the more formalized and traditional work-prep activities on Project Match's Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence, which usually count toward the federal work requirement), and (3) "lower-rung" activities (e.g., enrolling children in a new school, going to medical appointments, volunteering in the community—the less structured, personal and family activities on Project Match's Incremental Ladder, many of which do not count toward the work requirement, though this may change somewhat with reauthorization of the TANF legislation in 2002).

The table shows whether participants' monthly plans included one type of activity only or whether (and how) they combined different types of activities over time. Please note that the table shows *planned* activities—an indication of the needs and desires identified by the Pathways team together with the welfare recipient—in contrast to *completed* activities—an indication of what the welfare recipient actually did during the month. If employment was included in the monthly activity plan, it was because the welfare recipient actually had a job at the time.¹¹

A Range of Activities. It is evident from Table 4 that no matter what type of participant—TANF, Safety Net, left welfare, still on welfare—most plans included a range of activities over time: only a handful of participants did employment only; none did upper-rung activities only; and not many did lower-rung activities only, though lower-rung activities only were most common among Safety Net recipients.

¹¹In doing this activity analysis, we would have liked to use data on completed activities as well, but Oswego has systematically tracked only those activities in the monthly plan that currently count toward the federal work requirement. In the monthly meeting, the group leader does go over with the welfare recipient all the activities from the previous month's plan to review what was and was not done, but at this point all this information is not entered into the Pathways tracking system.

Table 4

**Cumulative Monthly Activities for Pathways Participants,
by Welfare Status as of December 2000**

Activities	All Participants Who Left Welfare	All Participants Still on Welfare	All TANF Participants Who Left Welfare	All TANF Participants Still on Welfare	All Safety Net Participants Who Left Welfare	All Safety Net Participants Still on Welfare
Included Employment	38.6%	43.9%	48.6%	51.3%	18.9%	23.2%
Employment Only	0.9%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%
Employment + Upper-Rung Activities	2.1%	0.3%	3.0%	0.4%	0.5%	0.0%
Employment + Upper-Rung + Lower-Rung Activities	31.6%	40.6%	40.1%	47.4%	14.8%	22.0%
Employment + Lower-Rung Activities	4.0%	3.0%	4.8%	3.5%	2.2%	1.2%
Did Not Include Employment	61.5%	56.1%	51.4%	48.7%	81.2%	76.8%
Lower-Rung + Upper-Rung Activities	49.5%	41.6%	43.4%	37.7%	61.5%	52.4%
Upper-Rung Activities Only	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Lower-Rung Activities Only	12.0%	14.5%	8.0%	11.0%	19.7%	24.4%
Sample Size	659	310	436	228	223	82

Source: Project Match calculations based on data provided by Oswego County, from the state MIS and the Pathways tracking system.

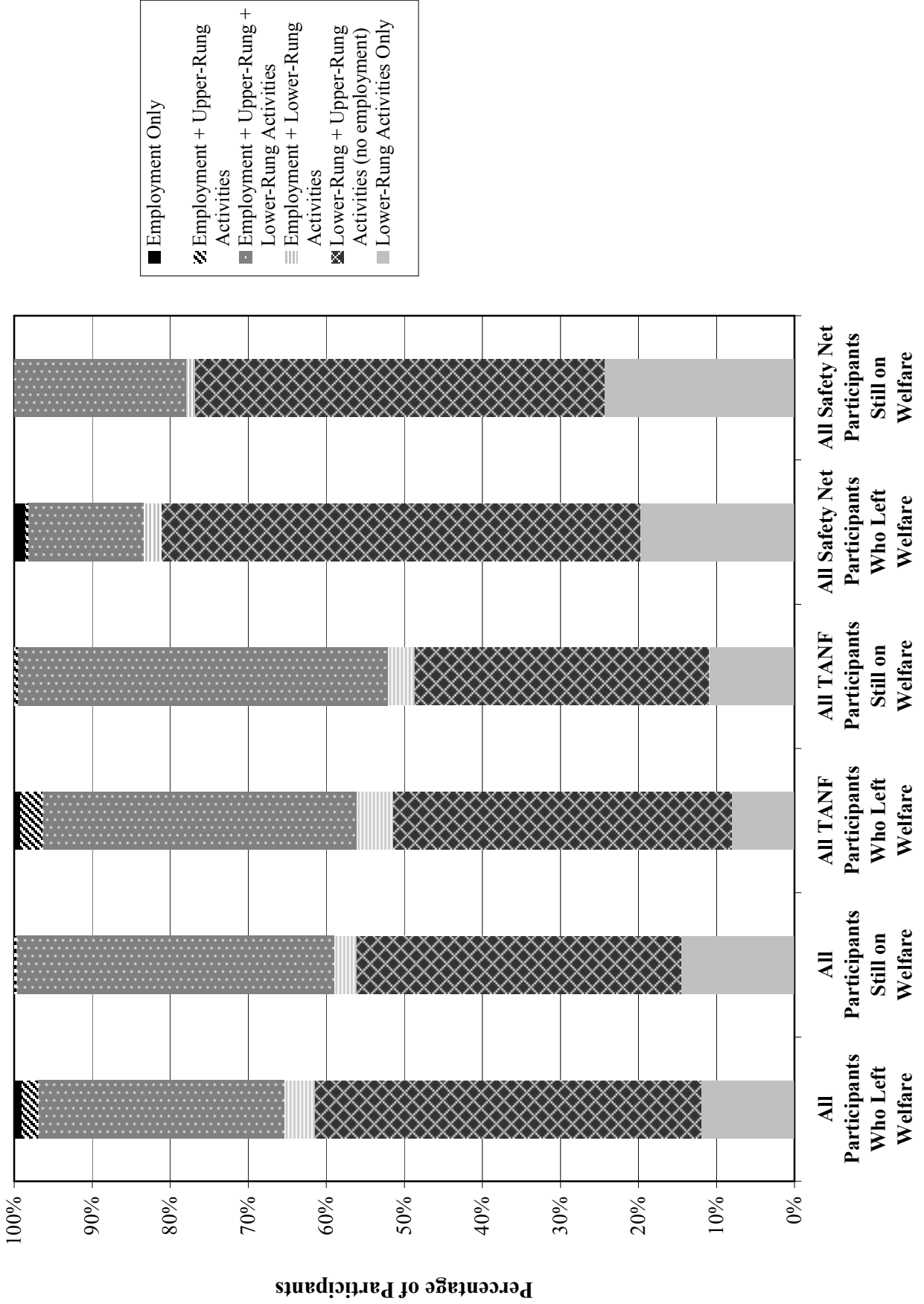
Notes: Distributions may not add to 100.0% because of rounding.

Upper-rung activities are the more formalized and traditional work-prep activities on Project Match's Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence, which usually count toward the federal work requirement, such as job search, education/training, and work experience.

Lower-rung activities are the less structured, personal and family activities on Project Match's Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence, which usually do not count toward the federal work requirement, such as enrolling children in a new school, going to medical appointments, and volunteering in the community.

Figure 2

**Cumulative Monthly Activities for Pathways Participants,
by Welfare Status as of December 2000**



Source: Project Match calculations based on data provided by Oswego County, from the state MIS and the Pathways tracking system.

It is notable that virtually every Pathways participant incorporated lower-rung activities into the monthly plan at some point. This finding suggests that during the monthly meeting welfare recipients were bringing up a wide range of concerns and issues in their lives, not just about work, and that welfare staff were acknowledging these concerns and issues as important to the welfare-to-work process. In other words, Pathways' tools and techniques have been successful at encouraging welfare recipients to discuss the different facets of their lives and at retraining welfare staff to address them.

Leavers vs. Stayers. What is also striking about Table 4 is that the monthly activities for participants who left welfare don't look very different from those for participants still on welfare, and this holds true even when TANF and Safety Net are broken out. In other words, it is impossible to tell from these general activity patterns whether those who are still on welfare are a harder-to-serve group, as reflected in their monthly plans, compared to those who left welfare; even those still on welfare after more than a year in Pathways (not shown in the table) don't look different activity-wise from those who left. Perhaps a more detailed analysis of monthly plans—for example, an examination of specific activities within the general categories or a comparison of planned and completed activities each month—would reveal sharper differences between those who left and those who stayed, but from this vantage point, no major variations are apparent and the data do not help us understand the differences between the two groups.

TANF vs. Safety Net. Where Table 4 does show a great difference is between TANF recipients and Safety Net recipients. As mentioned earlier, Safety Net recipients were more likely to engage in lower-rung activities only—in fact, about twice as likely. Also, there was very little employment among Safety Net recipients while in Pathways. This would make sense in light of the finding that almost no Safety Net cases closed because of earnings, but it begs the question of what New York State should expect from Safety Net recipients. It appears that many of these recipients are unlikely to go to work, and not all of them will be eligible for SSI. As discussed earlier, some will leave welfare for reasons other than earnings or SSI, but for those who remain, how far up the Incremental Ladder will they be able to get?

Compared to Safety Net recipients, there was much more work among TANF recipients while in Pathways. Among TANF recipients who left the rolls, for example,

about 50% worked at some point while in Pathways. This percentage far exceeds the percentage of TANF cases that closed because of earnings (13.5%), according to state MIS data. However, it is impossible for us to know the exact number of case closings in Oswego County that occurred because people were working, since noncompliance, a recipient's request to close the case, or other actions may in reality represent employment. In fact, when looking at the activities for TANF recipients whose case was closed because of noncompliance with the Pathways meeting requirement (not shown in the table), about 30% had employment in their monthly plans at some point. Thus, the state MIS data on closings because of earnings probably understate the number of TANF recipients who left the rolls because of employment.

Looking at the activities for TANF recipients still on welfare, about 50% had employment in their plans, which is encouraging, but that still leaves 50% who hadn't worked. As with the remaining Safety Net recipients, the natural question to ask is whether these TANF recipients will eventually go to work. If not, what should be expected of them in exchange for continued cash assistance? Again, detailed analyses of individuals' monthly plans might be helpful in establishing a set of expectations, though such analyses are outside the scope of this study.

VII. Discussion and Recommendations

From the outset, Project Match and Oswego County had similar expectations of the Pathways Case Management System. For both, the focus was on keeping people moving forward on a monthly basis; the focus was not on closing cases. Of course, though never explicitly articulated, both Project Match and Oswego County assumed that if a good case management system was in place so that people received needed services and engaged in a broad range of activities aimed at economic and family stability, eventually many would leave welfare. At the time, however, there were no data on which to base this assumption, since Oswego was an early implementer of Pathways. There was only faith in the principles and techniques embodied in the case management system.

No one anticipated the high level of case closings that actually occurred: 70.7% of TANF recipients and 75.8% of Safety Net recipients were no longer on the rolls two

years after Pathways was implemented. In our view, such a high level makes it very important to look at why people are leaving welfare and to distinguish between positive and negative reasons for closings—a topic about which the advocacy community has been very vocal in recent years, as the welfare rolls nationwide dropped dramatically. Defining better and worse reasons for case closings, from the perspective of individual and family well-being, was an important discussion at the second New York Pathways conference, held in April 2002 for all the counties in the state using the case management system; staff and administrators who attended went home thinking about how to make such distinctions and how policies and programs can be structured to increase closings for positive reasons.

Unfortunately, the closing codes in state management information systems don't always make it easy to distinguish the positive from the negative. There are some codes that represent definitively “good” reasons for a closing: earned income, for example, or unearned income, including SSI. In Oswego, there were many closings for these reasons—an accomplishment to be proud of. Many of the MIS codes are ambiguous, however. For example, as discussed earlier, noncompliance with eligibility requirements can represent a host of circumstances, some of them positive, some of them negative. The same is true of a client request to close a case, though from Project Match's perspective, it is a bit less ambiguous than noncompliance with eligibility requirements, since at least it represents active decision making on the part of the welfare recipient, in that the person has notified the agency of his or her intent to leave welfare, indicating conscious reflection on the issue. In contrast, when someone simply doesn't comply with an eligibility requirement, it is impossible to know whether the person has thought through and accepted the consequences of leaving welfare. So while the label *client request* is as ambiguous as *noncompliance* in terms of understanding the real reason behind a closing, it represents a less worrisome set of circumstances: on a practical level, “client request” leavers are more likely than “noncompliance” leavers to end up with a package of non-TANF/Safety Net benefits for which they are eligible and, on a psychological level, they are more likely to feel in control of their lives.

Not knowing the real reason behind noncompliance and client request closings makes interpreting the Oswego data difficult, since the proportions of closings coded as such are

relatively high: 30% of all closings were for noncompliance with eligibility requirements of any sort and 13.7% were by client request. It is impossible to know what was really going on with these welfare recipients. In particular, at Project Match we wonder about those whose case closed because of noncompliance with the Pathways meeting requirement: 24.3% of all TANF closings and 13.4% of all Safety Net closings. For us, Oswego's decision to use Pathways with every cash welfare recipient and to require attendance at the monthly meeting represents the fullest test of a long-held Project Match idea—that every welfare recipient should do something in exchange for a grant, even if that something is as simple as coming to a two- to three-hour monthly meeting. In our opinion, allowing people to receive a grant without expecting anything of them, while perhaps well intentioned, is more likely to harm than help them. First, experts in the field of human development believe that expectations play an important role in fostering positive individual growth.¹² Second, in the context of a welfare agency, those for whom there are no expectations seem to get little or no attention and to drift on the periphery of the system. This observation of ours was recently supported by a federal report documenting how exempt TANF recipients are less likely to receive services to address their problems.¹³

But besides being good for individuals and families, we believe that requiring everyone to do something—even something small—is the only meaningful way to formulate a welfare social contract. Otherwise there is no real contract. While New York county administrators may have thought that by implementing the Pathways meeting eligibility requirement they were simply ensuring regular and frequent contact with all clients that would support progress, they also reworked the social contract at the most fundamental level, but in the most humane way, since the expectation to attend a respectful, supportive monthly meeting is not onerous. But it is exactly because the expectation is not onerous that we are surprised by the number of welfare recipients who either chose not to or were unable to hold up their end of the new social contract.

¹²See, for example, the discussion of features of positive developmental settings in Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman, eds., *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002).

¹³U.S. General Accounting Office, *Welfare Reform: More Coordinated Federal Effort Could Help States and Localities Move TANF Recipients with Impairments Toward Employment* (Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, October 2001).

Implications for Pathways Practice. As the developers of Pathways, we have several recommendations to establish safeguards around the meeting eligibility requirement to lessen the likelihood of unwanted case closures and to increase the likelihood that welfare recipients will engage in active decision making. Many of these safeguards were suggested by counties in New York that are using Pathways:

1. Try not to rely solely on written communications to initially inform welfare recipients about Pathways and the meeting eligibility requirement. In our experience, written communications are often ignored or misunderstood by welfare recipients; sometimes they even get lost in the mail.
2. When informing welfare recipients about Pathways, clearly explain not only the consequences for missing a meeting without good cause, but also why the meeting is required (as a helping measure, not a punitive one) and what the person can expect during the meeting. This level of communication can allay anxiety and suspicion; it also gives people enough information to make an informed decision. Such careful attention to communication is particularly important when first implementing Pathways, since the Oswego data show that people already on the rolls when the system is implemented may be more resistant to the new expectations than people who come on the rolls after implementation.
3. As in Oswego County, establish a “second chance” policy for people who miss their first scheduled Pathways meeting without good cause, automatically scheduling them for another meeting.
4. Encourage welfare recipients to tell their caseworker if they decide they want to leave welfare for any reason and not to simply stop coming to meetings. This will give welfare recipients a chance to talk over and reconsider (or reflectively consider for the first time) why they want to leave welfare. It will also give welfare agencies a chance to really know why people are leaving

and to make sure people receive all post-welfare benefits to which they are entitled.

5. Follow up with “no-shows” to the group meeting by phone or through a home visit before closing the case. This will lessen the possibility that any truly vulnerable family slips through the cracks.

Of course, it is important to remember that to implement Pathways, a welfare agency is not required to make monthly meeting attendance an eligibility requirement; the requirement is not one of the implementation “non-negotiables” that are part of the Pathways package. While Project Match and the New York counties consider the eligibility requirement an important feature of Pathways implementation, the case management system is used without it elsewhere.

Implications for Pathways Research. Even with safeguards in place, there will probably always be some closings because of noncompliance with the Pathways eligibility requirement and, as developers of the case management system, we would like to have a better understanding of the reasons behind these closings. More specifically, was it something about Pathways that prompted the decision to stop attending? From a focus group with welfare recipients in a Pathways pilot in a Chicago welfare office, for example, we learned that some of the participants considered the group meeting and the diary childish or intrusive. Or was the decision prompted by the attendance requirement itself, regardless of Pathways? That is, did the person decide to leave welfare because he or she did not want to have to do anything in return for a cash grant? Perhaps the attendance requirement conflicted with an unreported job? Or was the decision prompted by changing circumstances in the person’s life that eliminated the need for welfare? These types of questions could be answered through a sensitively structured leaver survey.

In regard to research, we would also like to learn whether the meeting eligibility requirement increases the number of case closings at a site. In its absence, would the number of case closings at a Pathways site be the same, just distributed differently among the other possible reasons for case closings? This question could only be properly answered through a random assignment study involving a control group, an experimental

Pathways group subject to the eligibility requirement, and an experimental Pathways group not subject to the requirement. The findings from such a study would help us separate out the effects of the eligibility requirement from the effects of Pathways itself.

VIII. Conclusion

At the heart of Pathways is the need to relate to welfare recipients as individuals, which involves listening to their words, observing their actions, and taking advantage of every resource and regulation that might keep a person moving forward. This principle is embedded in the design of all the Pathways components and, by implementing them, welfare staff are prompted to know their clients better and to understand that progress looks different for each of them. Before Pathways implementation, welfare staff tend to think that people who are meeting the federal work requirement are all making progress, though after implementation they recognize that even some of these people can be “stuck,” and they watch out for them. Also before Pathways, staff usually do not recognize the incremental progress common to the most fragile welfare recipients, for whom simply agreeing to see a vocational rehabilitation counselor about training and employment opportunities while going through the SSI application process can signal a willingness to be planful about alternative sources of income should the application be denied and also a shift in self-perception in regard to capabilities and potential.

In Oswego, the Pathways catalyst to see people as individuals has been dramatically reinforced by the county’s implementation policies. In most welfare agencies around the country, staff expectations of and responses to welfare recipients are determined largely by caseload status: employable, employable with limitations, exempt, in sanction status, to name the most common. Each caseload status is tied to a specific set of rules and regulations that dictates what welfare recipients have to do—or don’t have to do—in exchange for a grant and what they are entitled to. Welfare staff usually don’t have the training, tools, or time to explore possibilities in terms of services and activities beyond those specified by the rules and regulations.

In Oswego, caseload statuses are still an important factor in determining agency expectations and responses, but they are no longer the sole factor, since every cash

welfare recipient, regardless of status, is assigned to a Pathways group and expected to come to a monthly meeting. Once in the meeting, welfare staff may start with the services and activities as dictated by the rules and regs, but through the structure of the meeting, the diary, and other Pathways tools and techniques, staff move beyond case status in considering with welfare recipients how their family might move forward. Someone who is exempt does not have to engage in an approved activity and meet the work requirement, for example, but through the meeting she may end up getting assistance with a child who's having problems at school, something that might never have come to light and been addressed in the absence of the eligibility requirement to attend a monthly Pathways meeting.

Oswego County has now been using the Pathways Case Management System for three and a half years. Based on their own experience as well as the experience of the other New York counties that have since implemented the system, Oswego administrators and line staff continue to consider ways that Pathways can be used to support agency capacity and client progress. From our perspective as the developers of Pathways, this level of integration within the agency is one of the most important signs of successful implementation, a sign that the agency has assumed a sense of ownership and considers the case management system an essential part of its normal daily operations.