

NEWS DIGEST

your quick guide to news from around the world

Welfare reform puts mothers in work force

1 SAN FRANCISCO — Welfare reform appears to be achieving one of its intended effects — pushing more mothers into the labor market, a Federal Reserve Bank official said Monday.

The bank's western district, headquartered in San Francisco, looked at changes in the labor force and compared it to the Aid to Families With Dependent Children caseloads.

"There has been an increase in labor force participation by women with families, and we know there has been a decrease in AFDC rolls," said Joe Matthey, editor of the bank's Western Economic Developments newsletter.

Welfare reform "appears to have the effect intended by Congress," he said.

The study by researcher Mary Daly found an unusual increase in the number of people entering the work force starting in September 1996 — when the welfare reform law known as the Personal Responsibility Act went into effect.

After years of flat numbers, the total percentage of Americans working or looking for work jumped by 0.6 percent to a record 67.25 percent in March and April of 1997.

The number of women maintaining families who entered the labor market skyrocketed — from 8 million to 8.5 million in that period, or 16 percent.

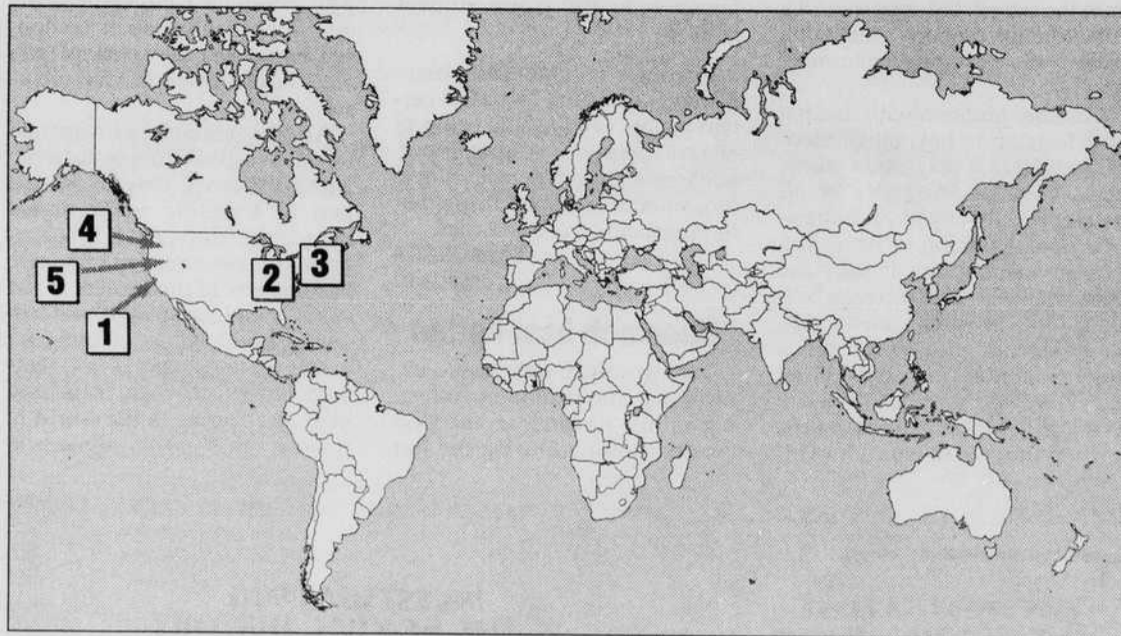
At the same time, the nation's AFDC rolls shrank by 640,000, Matthey said, not far from the 500,000 increase.

"It's not necessarily welfare recipients, but if you look at the caseload figures and the number of AFDC recipients ... it likely accounts for a portion of it," Matthey said.

Heidi Hartmann, director of the Washington-based Institute for Women's Policy Research, viewed the numbers with caution.

She said the changes could simply be a combination of a recovering economy and long-term trends that have developed over decades.

"Women are increasing their labor force participation every year, except in recessions," she said. "Another long-term trend is that especially mothers are (increasing participation), and another long-term trend is that the poor are increasing their participation," Hartmann said.



Court to discern when police can enter home

2 WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court agreed Monday to use an Oregon case to clarify what evidence of danger must exist before police with search warrants can break into a home without knocking first.

The court agreed to hear federal prosecutors' bid to use weapons seized from a man's home as evidence against him in a gun-possession case. The prosecutors say the seizure was proper even though police with a search warrant broke a window in the house without knocking first.

Hernan Ramirez was charged in 1994 with possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

Police with a search warrant went to his home in Boring, Ore., on a tip that an escaped inmate may have been there. Officials said the inmate had struck a guard, stole a vehicle and threatened to kill police officers and others.

The 45 officers arrived early in the morning and began announcing over a loudspeaker they had a search warrant. Without waiting for a response, one officer broke a garage window and began waving a gun through the window.

Ramirez said he and his wife thought they were being burglarized. He ran to a closet, got a gun and fired it into the ceiling. Ramirez then realized the window was broken by police, and he surrendered.

Genetic defect that causes obesity found

3 NEW YORK — For the first time, scientists have identified genetic flaws that make people fat.

One defect showed up in an 8-year-old girl who weighs nearly 200 pounds. She has already had surgery on her overburdened legs and liposuction just to help her get around.

The genetic defects are described in two reports, each dealing with a different gene. One report caps an intensive worldwide search for flaws in the gene that tells the body how to make the hormone leptin, while the other gives a new hint for understanding the complex process that controls a person's weight.

Experts said the newfound defects cause obesity only very rarely and do not apply to the vast majority of fat people.

"They're real landmark papers" said Dr. Albert Stunkard of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. But there's "no big public health or therapeutic message. ... The average middle-aged, overweight woman is not likely to see much benefit from this."

Genes do play an important role in ordinary human obesity, but that probably comes from subtle variations in their functioning rather than major defects like the newfound mutations, said Rudolph Leibel of Rockefeller University.

Answers still lacking in tampering case

4 TUMWATER, Wash. — A police investigation into how a piece of metal found its way into a Kellogg's Rice Krispies Treat is at a standstill after two months.

On April 30, Susan Shaw bought a box of eight Kellogg's treats from a grocery store. She said her 5-year-old son, Jared, cut himself on his cheek after biting into one of them.

The Tumwater woman reported the incident to police and supermarkets pulled the packaged treats off their shelves.

Now, almost two months later, the cut is healed and the snacks are back on store shelves, but investigators still don't have any answers. They say that after initially cooperating, Shaw has refused to talk with detectives.

"We have no idea why she is no longer cooperating," Detective Thor Ganesini said. He said questioning was "low-key" and the mother was never considered a suspect.

But Shaw and her attorney, Rick Cordes, say police have harassed her and seem to be trying to implicate her in the alleged product tampering.

The incident is considered to be isolated, and Kellogg's has said it has received no similar complaints. Cordes said he and Shaw have not discussed filing a lawsuit against either Kellogg's or the supermarket where the treats were purchased.

Inmate at center of murder investigation

5 SPARKS, Nev. — A California inmate serving a lengthy prison term for murder is the prime suspect in an 18-year-old murder case here and may have been involved in as many as 12 unsolved killings across the West, authorities said Monday.

"We believe he is a viable suspect in eight to 12 other murders across the West," Sparks Deputy Police Chief Bob Cowman said at a news conference.

Cowman and Washoe County District Attorney Dick Gammick refused to reveal the inmate's name, where he is in prison, or information about the other killings that occurred in the late 1970s.

They would only say that the inmate is 41 years old and was sentenced in 1985 to 44 years in prison for a 1984 murder in California.

But Cowman said he is the prime suspect in the 1979 killing of a Winnemucca woman whose body was found in a ditch behind a Sparks warehouse.

Rulan McGill, a 32-year-old wife and mother, drove to Reno on July 10, 1979, for a dental appointment and to shop. She was reported missing the next day when she failed to return home.

Two days after she left home, her abandoned vehicle was found behind a warehouse. The following morning, the victim's stepfather and an uncle discovered her body in a nearby ditch.

The case remained unsolved for 18 years, but this past January, California prison authorities told Cowman's department that the inmate claimed to be involved.

Cowman said the prisoner has corroborated evidence gathered from the 1979 murder scene and said another person witnessed the murder.

"We believe this person has provided sufficient detail to make him a viable suspect," said Cowman, who described the inmate as "an absolute predator-killer."

He said the inmate wants to talk to investigators without fear of prosecution — a concession authorities are unwilling to make.

"We certainly do not believe our duty to the victim and the family has diminished with the passing of time," Cowman said.

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