

*I've never worked much, in fact I've been poor
all my life*

I guess all I really own is ten kids and a wife

*This house I live in is mine, but it's really a
shack*

*But I always manage somehow to drive me a
brand new Cadillac*

— "Welfare Cadillac," Guy Drake

By RICK WARNER
Staff Writer

There is no Cadillac at 1233 New Bern Ave. Indeed, there is no car of any kind at the large, grey house, a rundown dwelling across from a Raleigh liquor store. The front steps are falling down and the walls inside are badly in need of paint. A tattered sofa sits outside the front door, dirty sponge rubber poking through its torn upholstery.

Sitting on the couch is Annie Marie Graham, the 25-year-old welfare recipient who has lived in the house with her four children since 1977.

"A car?" she says, repeating the visitor's question. "I don't even drive. I usually take the bus to the grocery store cause a cab's too expensive. I try to buy enough food to last the whole month, so I don't have to make another trip."

When the food is bought, Annie Graham, recently married and pregnant with her fifth child, carries it to the kitchen in the back of the house and stores it near the oven. It is an oven which has come in handy for more than cooking.

Unable to pay her fuel bill last winter, Mrs. Graham resorted to drastic measures.

"When we ran out of heat, I turned the oven on to keep the kitchen warm," she recalls. "At night, me and the children would stay in the kitchen till it was time to go to bed. Then I'd turn the oven off and we'd all bundle up together to stay warm."

Welfare life gets bumpier

"In the morning, I'd turn the oven on and bring a pan into the kitchen. I'd fill it with water and the children would take their baths there. It was too cold to take a bath in the bathroom."

Mrs. Graham sighs and nods her head slowly.

"Believe me, people who say living on welfare is easy just don't know."

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Popular country songs to the contrary, for the vast majority of welfare families, life has rarely been as smooth as a Cadillac ride. But today, with inflation way up and the taxpayers' desire to support social programs way down, the welfare road is even bumpier than usual.

The problem is a national one, but it hits home particularly hard in North Carolina, where participants in the primary welfare

program — AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) — are getting little more than their counterparts did 10 years ago.

In 1970, the maximum payment for a family of four in North Carolina with two children in school was \$191.40 a month. In 1980, the same family can receive a maximum of \$210 per month. That translates to a 10-year increase of \$18.60 per month — or 9.7 percent — during a period when the price of most essential goods has doubled or tripled.

Last year, the Legislature approved a 5 percent raise in AFDC payments, but it was the first increase in more than five years. "We asked for a 10 percent increase last year and 10 percent this year," says Kay Fields, who heads the state AFDC program. "But the way the economy is, it

looks like last year's increase is all we're going to get for a while."

AFDC, a program established by Congress in 1935 to provide financial aid to children deprived of one or both parents due to death, disability or continued absence — is one of three major programs in North Carolina generally lumped under the heading of "welfare." The others are the food stamp program, which was recently given an emergency extension by Congress, and Medicaid, which provides free medical service to many of the state's 190,000 AFDC recipients.

Even with all three programs, however, most welfare families in North Carolina are living well below the poverty level. A family of four, for instance, is eligible for a maximum of \$379 a month in AFDC and food stamps, or a total of \$4,548 a year. The

poverty level for an urban family of four in North Carolina, meanwhile, is \$7,450 a year. And the larger the family, the bigger the poverty gap.

Since almost all welfare households in the state are headed by mothers, and since most of them have no source of income besides AFDC and food stamps, they are finding it extremely difficult to meet their family's basic needs.

"To be honest about it, I don't know how they do it," says Joe Crook, a case worker with the Wake Department of Social Services. "Lots of times, it's a hand-to-mouth existence. Some days they'll skimp on food, other days it's heat. Most of them live in substandard housing, and lots of times they can barely afford that."

Crook says there's a joke going around among social workers that illustrates the point.

"When the recession hits and we're all out of work," he says, "we'll all move in with welfare clients and learn how they do it."

Annie Graham does it very carefully. At the beginning of each month, she maps out her budget with painstaking care, figuring every bill to the penny.

When the year began, she was getting \$208 a month from AFDC, \$220 from food

stamps and \$67 from a part-time babysitting job — a total of \$495 a month. Since getting married last month, her welfare payments have dropped, but her overall income has risen slightly due to her husband's \$130 a week salary as a sanitation worker.

Still, Mrs. Graham says, bill paying is a struggle.

Every month, the debits creep up on the credits at an alarming pace. First there's the rent (\$100). Then the lights (\$50). Then the gas (\$100 and more in the winter). Then the water (\$8). By the time the furniture (\$80), telephone (\$20), and insurance bills (\$35) are paid, there's little left over for things like food and clothing.

"In the winter, the fuel bill is so high that sometimes we have to cut back on food," she says. "When we run out of money, we eat a lot of sandwiches and beans. We'll go a couple of weeks on nothing but sandwiches and beans."

Feeding a growing family on a welfare budget requires a great deal of energy and resourcefulness. Careful shopping habits at the supermarket help, but it isn't always enough.

Lelia Sanders of Raleigh's Chavis Heights, who supports her five children on \$496 a month in AFDC, food stamp and child support payments, says long-term

planning is a necessity.

"Every summer, I go to the country and stock up on vegetables — corn, peaches, strawberries, whatever I can get. Then I take it all home and put it in the freezer so when we run short (of money) in the winter, we have something to eat."

To keep her children (ages 3 to 9) clothed, Mrs. Graham depends on donations, hand-me-downs and her own sewing skills. "I can't afford to buy new clothes," she says. "I just try to take what I can get and fix it up the best I can."

As for extras like holiday presents, they're out of the question. "I haven't been able to buy my children anything for Christmas the last three years," she says. "But this year we got adopted by a church and they gave us food and clothes and helped us with our gas bill. I don't know what I would have done without them."

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Like many welfare mothers, Annie Graham has learned to do without a lot of things that others take for granted. Born a Siamese twin, she was separated from her sister three months after birth. Her sister died after the operation and Annie grew up in a foster home. Two weeks after leaving the home, at the age of 15, she was raped. As a result, she became an unwed mother at 16.

She got a job at a sewing company, went back to school to get her high school degree, met a man she planned to marry, and got pregnant again. But the father-to-be was killed before the child was born. She tried to keep working, but couldn't afford a babysitter for the two young children. So, in 1973, she went on welfare. She has been on it ever since.

During the seven years she has been on welfare, Annie Graham has had two more children out of wedlock — one with a man who became a drug addict and went to jail, and another with a man she later learned was already married.

She has held several jobs over the years, but the cost of transportation and babysitters have prevented her from keeping them. But now, with the help of her new husband, she has hopes of working her way off the welfare rolls.

"I'd rather be working any day," she says. "Matter of fact, I'd rather be working two jobs than waiting for those checks every month. Believe me, nobody likes being on welfare."

Just who is on welfare in North Carolina? The most recent study of the AFDC system, conducted last year by the N.C. Division of Social Services, reveals some expected and unexpected answers.

First, the average AFDC family in the state includes only 1.8 children, a far cry from the accepted stereotype. One of the reasons for the low figure, however, is the increasing number of teen-age mothers receiving AFDC payments. In 1976, there were only 205 teen-age mothers receiving AFDC. By 1979, the number had jumped to 4,664 — an increase of more than twenty-fold. Since 82 percent of the teen-age mothers have only one child, the trend has worked to decrease the size of the average AFDC family.

Second, the average length of time a family stays on AFDC in North Carolina is 39 months, less than many people think. There are families who have been on it for much longer periods of time, but in most of those cases, at least one parent is permanently disabled. Social service officials admit the 39-month figure may be misleading, though, since some families have been on welfare more than once.

Third, while more than half of the nation's welfare recipients are white, 73 percent of North Carolina's rolls are made up of blacks. But again, this is misleading. North Carolina, like most Southern states, has a much higher percentage of black population than other areas of the country — 22 percent compared to a nationwide figure of 12 percent.

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Despite the wealth of information provided by the 1979 study, two important questions were not looked at. Is there a welfare cycle in North Carolina? Do the children of welfare families end up on welfare themselves?

While statistics are lacking, some social service officials say they have seen first-hand evidence that a welfare cycle exists. Linda Johnson, director of Wake's AFDC work incentive program (WIN) and a 30-year veteran of social work in North Carolina, says she noticed the problem when she took over the program in 1969.

"I realized then that I was seeing some of the children and grandchildren of AFDC mothers I had dealt with in the 1950s," she says. "When you get to a third-generation welfare family, it gets to be a very hard chain to break. But that's what WIN is all about."

Forty-five counties in North Carolina participate in the WIN program, which is designed to help AFDC recipients find jobs that will eventually lead them off welfare. All AFDC mothers in those counties, except those who are disabled or have children aged 6 or younger, must register with WIN, while those in the other 55 counties must register with the Employment Security Commission.

State social service officials say North Carolina's WIN program has been the most successful in the country the last two years, saving almost \$14 million in welfare payments by placing AFDC recipients in wage-earning jobs.

In Wake County, Mrs. Johnson says WIN is finding work for about 44 AFDC recipients a month.

"Contrary to public opinion, we find that the vast majority of people on welfare want to work," she says. "They're not only anxious to work, but they stay with it once they start. Our retention rate on jobs during the last year has been 87 percent.

"For example, we started a bus monitor program last November with 75 AFDC mothers and we've had a 92 percent retention rate. They ride the bus with the children and then they work in jobs at the school, like cafeteria workers or teachers' aides."

According to Mrs. Johnson, many WIN graduates have gone on to well-paying jobs. "They've become bank tellers, teachers, department store managers, draftsmen, truckdrivers, even a police officer. We had one woman with 12 children who opened her own beauty shop. As a matter of fact, the last time I looked, several of them were making more than my social workers."

Not everyone is as thrilled with the WIN program as Mrs. Johnson, however. Dr. Andrew Dobelstein, a professor at the UNC School of Social Work, says WIN has been "an abysmal failure" in North Carolina and across the country.

"A very small percentage of welfare recipients are finding jobs through WIN and most of the jobs they are getting pay practically nothing," says Dobelstein, the author of a recently published book entitled, "Politics, Economics and Public Welfare."

"WIN is a stopgap program. It's not equipping people for the kind of jobs that will get them off welfare for good."