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TANF Policies Reflect Racist Legacy of Cash Assistance Reimagined Program Should Center Black Mothers

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Executive Summary

Economic security programs can help families meet basic needs and improve their lives, but design features influenced by anti-Black racism and sexism have created an inadequate system of support that particularly harms Black families and other families of color. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the nation’s primary program for providing cash assistance to families with children when parents are out of work or have very low income, is perhaps the clearest example of a program whose history is steeped in racist ideas and policies (see text box, “Defining Key Terms,” for definitions) that particularly strip Black women of their dignity.

This paper, the first in a series on TANF and race, documents more than a century of false and harmful narratives — such as that Black women are unfit mothers — and paternalistic policies that sought to control Black women’s behavior and compel their labor. It then shows how these ideas and policies still influence TANF today. (It does not cover the full scope of TANF policies that are racist and should be changed, including child support enforcement requirements that apply to custodial parents and exclusions of immigrants.) This legacy of exclusion and subjugation is a major reason why TANF cash assistance, though a critical support for some, doesn’t meet the needs of most families in poverty, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

¹ The authors could not have developed and presented the analyses and recommendations in this report without the advice and assistance of many colleagues at CBPP and elsewhere. Many thanks to Cristina Toppin, who diligently reviewed the sources cited in this paper to ensure its accuracy. Thanks, too, to Sharon Parrott, Dottie Rosenbaum, Joseph Llobrera, Douglas Rice, Alicia Mazzara, Michael Mitchell, Elaine Mejia, Claire Zippel, and Tamara Fucile for their critical input. Thanks to Elizabeth Lower-Basch, Center for Law and Social Policy; Professor Bradley Hardy, Georgetown University; Elissa Minoff, Center for the Study of Social Policy; and Anne Price, Insight Center for Community Economic Development for serving as external reviewers, and Kendra Bozarth, Liberation in a Generation, for serving as communications consultant. The authors also wish to express gratitude to John Springer for his invaluable editorial assistance and to Liv Garahan and Rob Cady for their graphic design expertise.

Defining Key Terms

TANF does not refer explicitly to participants' race or ethnicity, but historical racism and contemporary patterns of racial discrimination and bias affect who has access to cash assistance. Below we define terms used in this report to describe policies that work either to uphold or to eliminate racism, a system of oppression based on race.

Antiracist policy: any policy that promotes or maintains racial equality, including by reversing racist policies and their effects. Antiracism as a broader philosophy recognizes racist policies, not just racist ideas, as a root of racial inequality.

Racist idea: any idea that regards one racial or ethnic group as inferior or superior to another in any way. Racist ideas are created to justify and sustain racist policy.

Racist policy: any policy or practice, written or unwritten, that creates or maintains racial disparities in access to public assistance, housing, goods and services, opportunity, and well-being.

White supremacy: "The idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. . . . [W]hite supremacy is] ever present in our institutional and cultural assumptions that assign value."

Sources: Definitions drawn from Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, One World, 2019; and Dismantling Racism, "What is Racism?: Racism Defined," <http://www.dismantlingracism.org/racism-defined.html>.

The "Black Women Best" (BWB) framework² developed by Janelle Jones, now Chief Economist at the Department of Labor, "argues if Black women — who, since our nation's founding, have been among the most excluded and exploited by the rules that structure our society — can one day thrive in the economy, then it must finally be working for everyone."³ Consistent with Jones' framework, redesigning TANF so that it centers the needs of Black women and families, adequately helps families struggling to afford the basics, and offers meaningful opportunities to gain skills and secure quality jobs would better serve families of all races and ethnicities, improving child outcomes and reducing hardship.

Federal policymakers created TANF in 1996 with the purported promise of helping families lift themselves out of poverty through work. But much of the debate around the 1996 law was centered (often implicitly, but sometimes explicitly) on Black mothers,⁴ who were portrayed as needing a

² "'Black Women Best' refers to both cis and trans women and femme-identified people, which includes anyone who is not a cis or trans woman but who identifies as feminine or is typically read as feminine by others, including those among them who are nonbinary and/or gender-nonconforming." Kendra Bozarth, Grace Western, and Janelle Jones, "Black Women Best: The Framework We Need for An Equitable Economy," Roosevelt Institute and Groundwork Collaborative, September 2020, https://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RI_Black-Women-Best_IssueBrief-202009.pdf.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Lucy A. Williams, "Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers: How Media Discourse Informs Welfare Legislation Debate," *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1995, <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1440&context=ulj>.

“stick” to compel them to be more responsible and leave the program. TANF’s harsh work requirements and arbitrary time limits disproportionately cut off Black and other families of color. Also, Black children are more likely than white children to live in states where benefits are the lowest and where the program reaches the fewest families in poverty. In the decade after policymakers remade the cash assistance system, it became much less effective at protecting children from deep poverty — that is, at lifting their incomes above half of the poverty line — and children’s deep poverty rose, particularly among Black and Latinx children.⁵

Many of TANF’s rules mirror those dating back to cash programs of the early 20th century, and many of its assumptions reflect anti-Black racism dating back to enslavement. Throughout the history of cash assistance, many policymakers and public figures have used these same racist justifications and stereotypes to question Black women’s reproductive choices, coerce Black women to work in exploitative conditions, and control, deride, and punish Black women who receive cash assistance. TANF’s design perpetuated these attitudes and, in some ways, reinforced them, such as through stricter work requirements and expanded state control over program rules.

Briefly summarized, this paper shows that:

Slavery and Jim Crow laid the foundation for the economic, reproductive, and behavioral control policies that have permeated later cash assistance programs, including TANF.

Labeling Black people as biologically inferior to white people and inherently lazy, promiscuous, irrational, and resilient to pain, white enslavers employed forced reproduction and labor to exploit, control, and punish enslaved Black women while maximizing their economic returns. Even after emancipation, white policymakers and employers continued to control when and where many Black people worked. White landowners’ system of sharecropping trapped Black people in debt, which their meager earnings could rarely pay off. Vagrancy laws and other policies criminalized Black people and forced many of them into involuntary servitude and other forms of exploitative work.

The idea that only *some* families “deserve” cash assistance is evident in mothers’ pensions of the early 20th century, which predated federal aid programs created in the New Deal. These state and local programs aimed to enable children to be cared for in their homes if their families lost a male breadwinner due to death, abandonment, or poor health. The original proponents of mothers’ pension programs made clear that a child’s deservingness for aid depended on the mother’s character; to state and local program administrators, that often meant aiding white children of widowed mothers, not children of unwed or Black mothers. Federal policymakers designing later cash assistance programs preserved much of states’ and localities’ discretion over mothers’ pension programs.

States’ control over the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program, created in 1935, enabled them to exclude many Black and brown people. ADC (renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC in 1962) provided federal funding to states to assist children who lived with a single mother. Southern members of Congress insisted that state and local officials

⁵ Danilo Trisi and Matt Saenz, “Deep Poverty Among Children Rose in TANF’s First Decade, Then Fell as Other Programs Strengthened,” CBPP, February 27, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/deep-poverty-among-children-rose-in-tanfs-first-decade-then-fell-as>.

control ADC eligibility and benefit levels, which enabled them to preserve an economic system that relied on the low-wage labor of Black workers in the South and Latinx workers in the Southwest.

The large majority of Black working women were excluded from other New Deal social programs like unemployment insurance and Old Age Insurance (now known as Social Security) because they were either domestic or agricultural workers, and many fell deeper into poverty during the Great Depression. Similarly, the new ADC program did little for Black families as they made up a small share of the ADC caseload, especially in the South. Many Southern states denied Black families access to ADC because they did not want to “interfere with local labor conditions.”

As ADC rolls grew and diversified in the 1940s and 1950s, a number of states imposed punitive policies to control mothers, disproportionately harming Black families. Starting in the 1940s, some states passed conduct- or morals-based eligibility policies such as so-called “man-in-the-house” or “suitable home” policies. States targeted the new laws at Black and unmarried mothers and their children. For example, in the first three months after Louisiana barred children from receiving ADC if their mothers were deemed “unsuitable” because of sexual activity outside marriage, *95 percent* of the 6,000 children cut off were Black.

In addition, many state policymakers focused on Black women’s work and work ethic, even though Black women have historically had higher work rates than white women. Some states passed “farm policies” cutting off ADC benefits during planting and harvest seasons to coerce Black parents to work in agriculture even if no paying jobs were available. These issues were not confined to the South: some policymakers in the North denounced Black migrants moving to their cities, who they claimed were unwilling to work and only seeking more generous ADC benefits.

Despite greater enforcement of federal protections for AFDC eligibility, harmful narratives about Black single mothers began driving debates over cash assistance in the 1960s and 1970s. In a positive development, federalization of some AFDC eligibility rules enabled significant gains in ensuring basic rights for those applying for or receiving aid during these decades. However, there was a growing backlash against the rising number of Black and brown families on AFDC and against Black social movements elevating the issue of Black poverty. In the 1960s and 1970s, increasingly negative media coverage about waste, fraud, or abuse in public assistance programs — stories often illustrated with photos of Black people — fed into stereotypes of Black single mothers as irresponsibly refusing to work and having large numbers of children to receive cash assistance. A controversial report on Black families by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan reinforced these narratives about Black single mothers, as did speeches by presidential candidate Ronald Reagan attacking “welfare queens.”

The spread of these narratives contributed to weakened public support for AFDC and led many federal policymakers to begin moving away from the idea that AFDC mothers’ primary responsibility should be caring for their children in the home. The federal government took the first steps toward the work requirements that we see today in TANF by enacting the Work Incentive Program in 1968.

The end of the century brought a return to greater state control over cash assistance and an emphasis on “personal responsibility.” Racist narratives about Black women from the media and public figures continued to be the backdrop during the “welfare reform” debates of the 1980s and 1990s. Conservative scholars charged that AFDC and other government assistance reinforced a

“culture of poverty,” especially within Black communities; the frameworks they proposed to address poverty centered work, regardless of whether jobs were available or if they paid a wage to lift families out of poverty.

Starting in the early 1980s, AFDC went through a series of changes. First, the Reagan Administration pushed through major cuts to the program. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the federal government issued waivers granting states flexibility to experiment with changes in their AFDC programs; use of the waivers expanded significantly in the early 1990s under the Clinton Administration. Often using racist dog whistles like promoting “personal responsibility,” state policymakers imposed new requirements and restrictions such as time limits, increased work requirements, and family caps (which punished families by limiting additional benefits if a mother had another child while receiving AFDC benefits).

Bill Clinton, who campaigned for the presidency promising to “end welfare as we know it,” and House Republicans led by Speaker Newt Gingrich, who talked about reestablishing orphanages in the context of “welfare reform,” called for even more dramatic changes. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which Clinton signed in August 1996 after vetoing two previous bills, replaced AFDC with the TANF block grant, wiping out federal eligibility rules and ending families’ entitlement (or individual right) to cash assistance. TANF includes harsh work requirements and grants states significant control over how to spend their fixed TANF resources; both of these design features give states strong incentives to make it hard for families to access aid and easy for families to lose assistance if they are able to get into the program.

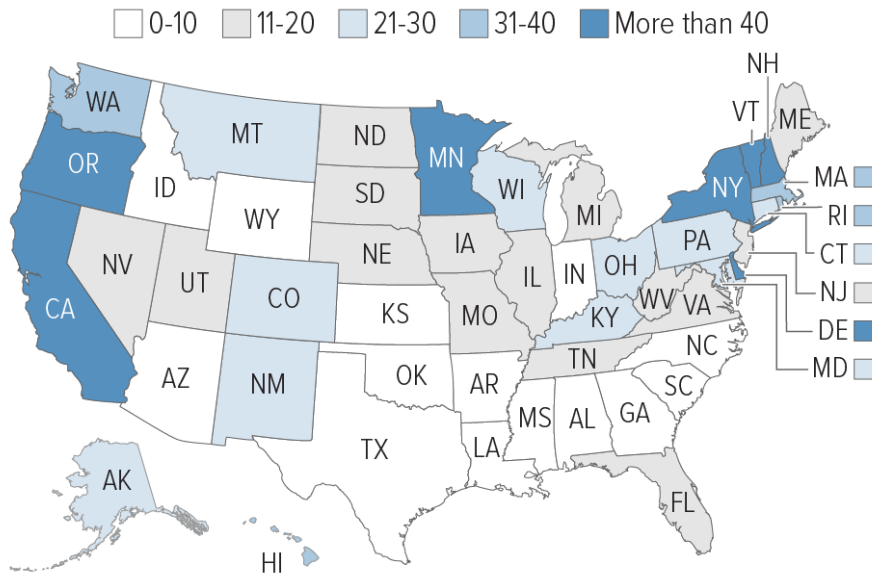
TANF’s embedded racism and unfettered state control have led to a deteriorating cash assistance program for all families, with Black families facing a disproportionate impact. A quarter century after federal and state policymakers created and implemented TANF, an already low-benefit program has diminished further in generosity and reach, leaving millions of families with children with no regular source of income to meet their basic needs when they cannot work. In 1996, 68 families with children received benefits for every 100 families in poverty; by 2019, that figure had dropped to 23, and in 14 states it was 10 or less. (See Figure 1.) Black children have the greatest likelihood of living in states with the lowest benefits and with programs that reach the fewest families in need.⁶

⁶ Laura Meyer and Ife Floyd, “Cash Assistance Should Reach Millions More Families to Lessen Hardship,” CBPP, November 30, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/cash-assistance-should-reach-millions-more-families-to-lessen>; Ali Safawi and Ife Floyd, “TANF Benefits Still Too Low to Help Families, Especially Black Families, Avoid Increased Hardship,” CBPP, October 8, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/tanf-benefits-still-too-low-to-help-families-especially-black>.

FIGURE 1

States' TANF Cash Assistance Programs Reach Few Poor Families

Number of families receiving TANF benefits for every 100 families with children in poverty in 2019



Note: TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Figures reflect two-year averages for 2018-19.

Source: CBPP analysis of poverty data from the Census' Current Population Survey and TANF caseload data collected by CBPP from state agencies

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TANF policies have done more to limit access to the program than to help parents find quality jobs, and they have disproportionately affected Black and brown women, who are far more likely than white women to lose benefits because they were sanctioned for not meeting a program rule or reached a time limit. TANF behavioral and work requirements have reduced access to income assistance and reinforced negative messages about parents, particularly Black parents; they have done little to help parents improve their employment prospects. Most parents end up returning to the unstable, low-paid jobs that led them to TANF in the first place. And while TANF proponents claimed states would use the savings from TANF caseload declines to invest more in work programs and work supports, states instead have redirected much of those savings to fund other services in ways that often supplant state investment.

Centering the needs of Black mothers and children would improve the well-being and economic security of all families with children. A redesigned TANF cash assistance program has a role to play to support families when they fall on hard times. Recognizing the ways in which racist views of Black women have influenced the basic design of the current TANF program is the first step to redesigning TANF with *antiracist* policies. Such a redesign in turn, would establish a cash assistance program that works better for *all* families with the lowest incomes, just as posited in the

Black Women’s Best framework. A redesigned TANF system would include policies that support families and help expand opportunity, including:

- Establishing a federal minimum benefit so that no family falls below a certain income level.
- Ending and barring mandatory work requirements.
- Barring behavioral requirements, time limits, and other eligibility exclusions.
- Refocusing TANF agencies on helping families address immediate crises and improving long-term well-being.
- Changing TANF’s funding structure to strengthen basic assistance, address funding inequities, and prevent erosion over time.

Enslavement and Jim Crow: Beginnings of Reproductive, Economic, Behavioral Control

Attempts to control Black women’s reproduction, work, and other behaviors started with enslavement and continued under the Jim Crow laws of the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s mandating racial segregation in public facilities. They reflected a social construction of race that labeled Black people as biologically inferior to white people and inherently lazy, promiscuous, irrational, and resilient to pain.⁷ (Also see Appendix 2: Racist Narratives of Black Women.)

Forced reproduction and labor were standard practices of white enslavers to exploit, control, and punish enslaved Black women.⁸ White enslavers wanted to maximize their economic returns by controlling Black women’s reproduction.⁹ Under enslavement, Black women were punished when they did not bear children. State laws further incentivized the sexual abuse of Black women: the rape of an enslaved woman was not recognized as a crime and all children born to enslaved women were legal property of the enslaver.¹⁰

Even pregnancy did not always protect women. In one especially horrific example, some enslavers dug holes in the ground and forced pregnant women to put their belly in the hole to “protect” the child as they were whipped.¹¹ The expectation that Black women have children did not reduce the amount of work demanded of them; pregnant women often worked to the point of miscarriage and new mothers had to work, sacrificing the health — and often the lives — of their babies.¹²

⁷ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, Vintage Books, 1997, pp. 1-22; Elisa Minoff, “The Racist Roots of Work Requirements,” Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2020, pp. 4, 9, <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Racist-Roots-of-Work-Requirements-CSSP-1.pdf>.

⁸ Barbara Olomade, “The Unbroken Circle: A Historical and Contemporary Study of Black Single Mothers and Their Families,” *Wisconsin Women’s Law Journal*, Vol. 3, 1987.

⁹ Roberts, pp. 22-56.

¹⁰ Olomade; Roberts, pp. 22-56.

¹¹ Roberts, pp. 39-40.

¹² Roberts, pp. 22-56.

Enslaved women, men, and children did back-breaking work in fields, homes, and even factories. In the fields, women could work 12 to 16 hours a day. Black women not working in the fields worked as laundresses, maids, cooks, nurses and midwives, and caregivers for both Black and white children.¹³ They were violently punished if they did not work or produce according to the enslaver's expectations. Enslavement narrowly defined the types of work acceptable for Black people as those that benefited white people, one historian argues.¹⁴ For 250 years the unpaid and coerced labor of Black men, women, and children drove large parts of the American economy.¹⁵

After emancipation and the brief hope of a transformed system under Reconstruction, the "freedom" that many Black people experienced differed little from enslavement. In 17 Southern states,¹⁶ legislatures cemented a white supremacist socioeconomic order through Jim Crow laws that lasted nearly a century, while sanctioning anti-Black violence by white individuals and mobs. (De facto segregation and anti-Black violence also existed in Northern states.¹⁷) White policymakers and employers continued to control when and where many Black people worked. White landowners' system of sharecropping trapped Black people in debt, which their meager earnings could rarely pay off. Vagrancy laws and other policies criminalized Black people for sometimes trivial behaviors simply because local white officials deemed them not to be working.

These laws led to different forms of involuntary servitude, such as convict leasing, chain gangs (groups of imprisoned people forced to work on roads or other public infrastructure), and debt peonage (in which employers forced workers to pay off debt with work).¹⁸ State officials also found other ways to make Black people work. For example, in 1918, at least two Southern localities attempted to legally coerce Black women to work in response to fears that they were refusing to work because of the payments some were receiving due to their husbands' service in World War I.¹⁹

¹³ Many Black women continued to work in these types of jobs throughout the 20th century. Sally Lloyd *et al.*, "Analysis of Black Women's Historical Labor Trends & Systemic Barriers To Economic Mobility," Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, 2020, p. 11, https://www.womensfundingnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Final_Hist_Black_Women_Report_Design_reduced.pdf.

¹⁴ Minoff.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, Liveright, 2013, p. 136.

¹⁷ Lewis M. Steel, "Jim Crow in the North: A new history examines the struggle to integrate above the Mason-Dixon Line," *In These Times*, January 8, 2009, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/jim-crow-in-the-north>.

¹⁸ Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, Anchor Books, 2009, pp. 338-370.

¹⁹ In Greenville, South Carolina a city ordinance would have required Black women to carry a "labor identification card," and they faced being "put to work, put in jail or fined heavily" if local officials found them not to be regularly employed. The ordinance came about because the city council heard numerous complaints of "negro women who are not at work and refuse employment when it is offered them, the result being that it is exceedingly difficult for families who need cooks and laundresses to get them." Local reports stated that Black women receiving a monthly allowance from the U.S. War Department "declined to work on the ground that they can get on without working." Other Black women were said to have "flatly refused hons without giving any reason whatsoever, while still offers pretend that they are employed when . . . they derive a living from illegitimate means." See "Negro Women to Be Put to Work," *Greenville News*, Greenville, South Carolina, October 2, 1918, <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/38314573/negro-women-to-be-put-to-work/>. A similar proposal in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, would have expanded an existing "work or fight order" to compel Black

Jim Crow laws controlled other behaviors by denying Black people's right to vote and telling them where they could eat, walk, sit, and spend their money, among other things.

Anti-Black violence was another means of controlling Black women. For example, many Black women still did not have full control over their sexual and reproductive decisions. Black women and girls were systematically raped by white men in a parallel to the reign of terror in which thousands of Black people were lynched.²⁰ Cole Blease, governor of South Carolina from 1911 to 1915, pardoned both white and Black men convicted of raping Black women, stating, "I . . . have very serious doubt as to whether the crime of rape can be committed upon a negro."²¹

Centuries of Black women's forced reproduction and labor was foundational to the white-dominated order as the country moved into the 20th century. Given the history, it is not surprising that later policies would continue to exclude Black women from public assistance programs in the belief they would not work otherwise and continue to punish their sexual or reproductive decisions.

Mothers' Pensions: Restricted to "Deserving" Families

The idea that only families meeting specific criteria deserve government support dates back to the beginnings of cash assistance. In the early 1900s, white middle-class women reformers known as maternalists sought to address increasing destitution among widowed mothers and their children that accompanied industrialization,²² but only for those they believed were "deserving." Their proposal for mothers' pensions — designed to enable children to be cared for in their homes if their families lost a male breadwinner due to death, abandonment, or poor health — found support in a 1909 White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children, which concluded that:

Children of parents of worthy character, suffering from temporary misfortune, and children of reasonably efficient and deserving mothers who are without the support of the normal breadwinner, should as a rule, be kept with their parents, such aid being given as may be necessary to maintain suitable homes for the rearing of children. . . Except in unusual circumstances, the home should not be broken up for reasons of poverty, but only for considerations of inefficiency or immorality.²³

women receiving War Department allowances to work. See National Association for the Advancement of Colored People telegram to President Woodrow Wilson, September 23, 2018, <http://recordsofrights.org/records/280/naacp-telegram-regarding-forced-labor-of-women>.

²⁰ Ruth Thompson-Miller and Leslie H. Picca, "'There Were Rapes!': Sexual Assaults of African American Women and Children in Jim Crow," *Violence Against Women*, July 3, 2016, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077801216654016>.

²¹ Soraya Nadia McDonald, "'The Rape of Recy Taylor' explores the little-known terror campaign against black women," *The Undeclared*, December 14, 2017, <https://theundeclared.com/features/the-rape-of-recy-taylor-explores-the-little-known-terror-campaign-against-black-women/>.

²² Premilla Nadasen, Jennifer Mittelstadt, and Marisa Chappell, *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents, 1935-1996*, Routledge, 2009, p. 12-13.

²³ Proceedings of the Conference on the Care of Dependent Children, January 25-26, 1909, pp. 9-10, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.30000048957363&view=1up&seq=11&skin=2021>.

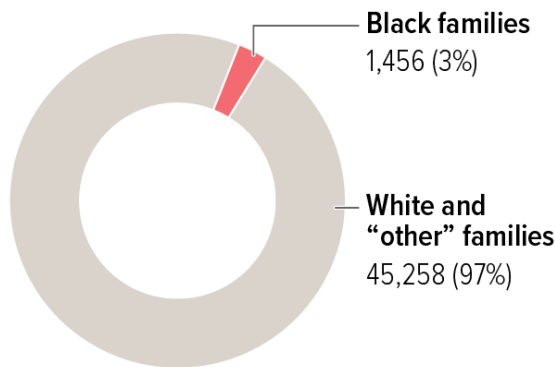
Mothers' pensions, funded and operated by states or local governments, were first established in the 1910s, starting with Illinois' program in 1911.²⁴ Dozens of states and localities followed Illinois' lead by the mid-1920s.

Mothers' pension programs reflected traditional ideas about marriage and gender roles. When caseworkers determined that a family's composition or a mother's conduct did not align with these expectations, they were deemed unworthy of aid.²⁵ White children of widowed mothers, who made up the vast majority of mothers' pension recipients, were seen as deserving because they lost their breadwinning father through no fault of the mother.²⁶ Children of unwed mothers — of any race — were usually excluded.²⁷ Fewer than 0.1 percent of mothers' pension children had unwed mothers, a 1933 study found.²⁸

Children of Black mothers were also largely excluded, regardless of whether the mother was widowed, abandoned, or unwed and regardless of economic need.²⁹ Only 3 percent of families whose race was reported in the 1931 study had a Black mother.³⁰ (See Figure 2.) Black families were more likely to access programs in Northern and Midwestern states; together, Ohio and Pennsylvania had about half of all identified Black families receiving mothers' pension aid. (See Appendix Table 1.) Yet while thousands of Black people were moving north and to urban centers during this era as the Great Migration began, most Black people still lived and worked in the rural South. Mothers' pension programs were very small overall in the Deep South and only served 39 Black families in 1931, compared to 2,957 white families.³¹ (See Appendix Table 2.) Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina were three of the four states that did not even have programs established by 1931.³²

FIGURE 2

Black Families Just 3 Percent of Mothers' Pension Recipients in 1931



Note: State and local mothers' pension programs aimed to enable children to be cared for in their homes if their families lost a male breadwinner due to death, abandonment, or poor health. Data based on the mothers who reported their race. Roughly 749,000 Black people lived in areas with mothers' pension programs in 1930. "Other" families include undefined races that are not white or Black.

Source: U.S. Children's Bureau

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²⁴ Winifred Bell, *Aid to Dependent Children*, Columbia University Press, 1965, p. 7.

²⁵ Bell, pp. 6-9; Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 15-16.

²⁶ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 15-16.

²⁷ Bell, pp. 9-11; Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 15-16.

²⁸ U.S. Children's Bureau 1933, in Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 95-97.

²⁹ Black fathers may not have been with their families for the same reasons as some white fathers, but also for reasons that were specific to the Black community. Black men often left their families in search of work because of employment discrimination and depressed wages for Black workers. Additionally, many Black men were imprisoned or killed by white authorities and individuals.

³⁰ U.S. Children's Bureau 1933, in Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 98-99.

³¹ *Ibid.* The states are Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

³² New Mexico was the fourth.

For families with access to mothers' pensions, benefits were generally low. Limited funding for local programs was one reason, but some local administrators also held concerns about giving mothers too much cash and questions about how they would use it.³³ For example, one administrator feared married women would leave their husbands if they thought they could live independently.³⁴ In 1931, most states with programs had average monthly grants at or below \$30, or about \$452 in 2021 dollars. Sixteen states, eight of them in the South, had average monthly benefits of less than \$20, or about \$302 today.³⁵

States and localities controlled eligibility and benefits for mothers' pension programs, and states maintained much of that power in later cash assistance programs. As discussed below, those later programs continued to limit access to certain families and set low benefits.

New Deal and Aid to Dependent Children: Excluding Black Women From Social Insurance

The creation of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC, renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC] in 1962) as part of the 1935 Social Security Act marked the beginning of the federal government's ongoing role in providing cash assistance to children in poverty. But ADC and other New Deal relief and work programs excluded many Black and brown people.³⁶

For example, policymakers originally designed unemployment insurance and retirement insurance primarily to support white male breadwinners.³⁷ Even though unemployment was extremely high among Black workers — up to 80 percent in some places as of 1932³⁸ — the new unemployment insurance programs explicitly excluded agricultural and domestic workers, the sectors where most Black women worked. Social Security's retirement insurance excluded agricultural and domestic workers as well. As a result, 90 percent of Black women laborers were initially ineligible for these social insurance programs³⁹ and two-thirds of Black women workers were still ineligible a full decade later.⁴⁰

Southern legislators demanded unfettered state control over ADC, which provided funding to states to assist children who were “deprived of parental support or care by reason of death, continued absence from the home, or physical incapacity of a parent” and who lived with a parent or relative.⁴¹ The program was intended to be small; many of the policymakers designing it (almost

³³ Bell.

³⁴ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, p. 15.

³⁵ U.S. Children's Bureau 1933, in Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 92-93.

³⁶ Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare*, Free Press, 1994, pp. 190-195.

³⁷ Gordon, pp. 190-195.

³⁸ Lloyd *et al.*, p. 14; Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, p. 16.

³⁹ Ellen Mutari, Marilyn Power, and Deborah M. Figart, “Neither Mothers Nor Breadwinners: African-American Women's Exclusion From US Minimum Wage Policies, 1912-1938,” *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2002, p. 39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545700210160988>; Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 17-32.

⁴⁰ Gordon, p. 276.

⁴¹ The Social Security Act of 1935, Title IV.

all of whom were male) assumed that not many single mothers needed this support, and not many were “deserving” of assistance.⁴² The Roosevelt Administration wanted to set federal standards for benefits, but Southern members of Congress insisted that state and local officials control ADC eligibility and benefit levels. Their goal, according to a number of historians, was to preserve an economic system that relied on the low-wage labor of Black workers in the South and Latinx workers in the Southwest.⁴³

As a result, the Great Depression pushed more Black families — who were already struggling under exploitative work conditions, discrimination, and segregation — deeper into poverty. White workers replaced Black workers in many unskilled jobs usually reserved for Black workers. Black sharecroppers, already paid less than their white counterparts, saw their wages drop or lost their jobs altogether. Black women domestics could sometimes still find work but often at a fraction of the low wages they received in better times.⁴⁴ Yet despite the extremely high poverty levels among Black families, they made up only 14 to 17 percent of the ADC caseload between 1937 and 1940 and an even smaller share in Southern states, where more than three-fourths of the Black population lived in 1940.⁴⁵ Mississippi did not even start an ADC program until 1941.⁴⁶ Many Southern states continued to deny Black families access to ADC because, in the words of one historian, they did not want to “interfere with local labor conditions.”⁴⁷ As one field supervisor put it, Black families “have always gotten along” and if made eligible for assistance, “all they’ll do is have more children.”⁴⁸

⁴² Linda Gordon’s research found the Children’s Bureau estimated serving up to 288,000 families in ADC. However, that was less than the 358,000 female-headed families receiving New Deal relief assistance in 1934, before ADC’s creation, through various state and local programs. Gordon, p. 257.

⁴³ Gordon, p. 276; Robert C. Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State*, Harvard University Press, 1998; Cybelle Fox, “A New Deal for the Alien,” in *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal*, Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 250-280. For other commentaries on the systematic exclusion of Black and Hispanic persons from New Deal protections more broadly, see also Ira Katznelson, Kim Geiger, and Daniel Kryder, “Limiting Liberalism: The Southern Veto in Congress, 1933-1950,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 108, No. 2, 1993, p. 297, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2152013>; Ira Katznelson, “Rules for Work,” in *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 55-59.

⁴⁴ Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010, pp. 2, 23, 24, 29, 30.

⁴⁵ Bell, p. 34; Bobbie Green Turner, *Federal/ State Aid to Dependent Children Program and Its Benefits to Black Children in America, 1935-1985*, 1993, p. 110.

⁴⁶ Turner, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Bell, p. 34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

World War II and Postwar: Punitive Policies to Control Mothers

The early 1940s marked a shift in the composition of the ADC caseload. White widows began leaving ADC after Social Security expanded eligibility to include survivors of qualified workers in 1939.⁴⁹ This increased the share of ADC recipients who were Black, divorced, separated, or unwed mothers. After wartime jobs ended and other jobs moved to the suburbs, many women sought out public support;⁵⁰ the program grew from 372,000 families in 1940 to 652,000 in 1950, a 75 percent increase. With more Black families living outside the South and thus better able to access the program, their share of recipients grew from 17 percent to 31 percent over this period.⁵¹ The postwar years also saw growing rates of divorce and of births to unmarried mothers. The ADC caseload and share of Black families steadily grew throughout the 1950s.⁵²

Policymakers in a number of states criticized the types of families receiving ADC and the program's rising costs and implemented punitive policies that disproportionately harmed Black families. So-called "suitable home" and "man-in-the-house" rules kicked off or denied initial access to mothers who engaged in activity deemed morally or sexually deviant.⁵³ The goal of the new rules, as one Georgia policymaker put it, was to "clean up" the rolls.⁵⁴

"Suitable home" laws, meant to protect children from maltreatment and neglect and support their health development, allowed states to deny aid based on health or moral determinations of a home's fitness for child rearing. Between the late 1940s and early 1960s, 23 states passed or instituted "suitable home" requirements. In many Southern states, the "suitable home" policy regarded the household of an unmarried mother as unsuitable by definition.⁵⁵ Often these policies specifically targeted Black mothers and their children. In perhaps the most extreme example, Louisiana's 1960 "suitable home" laws cut off more than 6,000 families from the program within three months; 95 percent of the children in those families were Black.⁵⁶ (See Figure 3.)

⁴⁹ Congressional Resource Service, "The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant: A Legislative History," November 30, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44668.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, p. 24.

⁵¹ Estimates based on available data. Bell, p. 34; Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*, Routledge 2005, p. 7.

⁵² Turner, pp. 147-149.

⁵³ Bell, pp. 42-44; Roberts, p. 228; Kasia O'Neill Murray and Sarah Garioch, "A Brief Legislative History of the Child Welfare System," Pew Charitable Trusts, 2004, https://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/foster_care_reform/legislativehistory2004pdf.pdf.

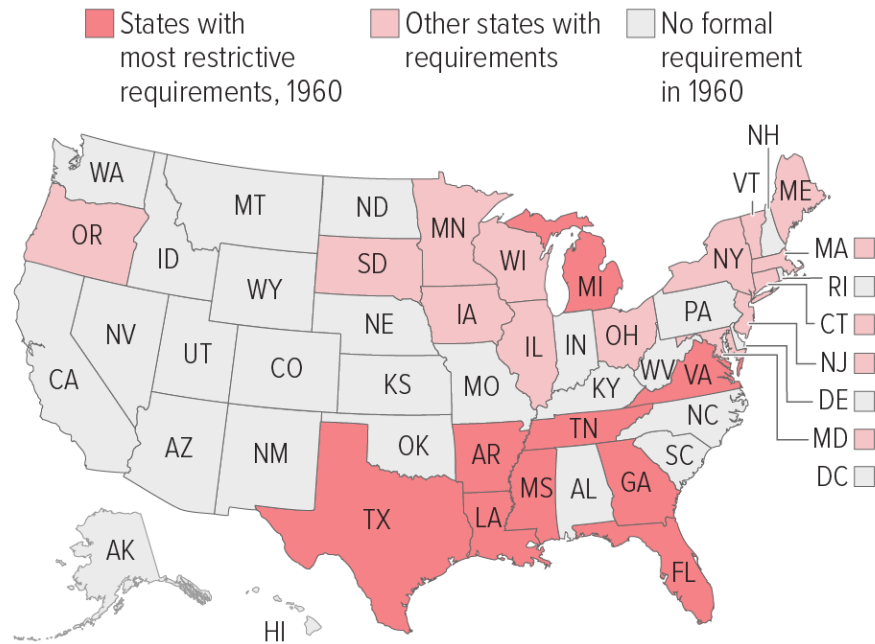
⁵⁴ Bell, pp. 94-95.

⁵⁵ Bell, pp. 33-34.

⁵⁶ Bell, pp. 137-141.

FIGURE 3

“Suitable Home” Requirements in Many States Denied ADC Access, Especially in South



NOTE: ADC = Aid to Dependent Children. “Suitable home” requirements denied aid to families that the state claimed were unfit for child rearing. Many Southern states regarded the household of an unmarried mother as unsuitable by definition.

Source: Winifred Bell, *Aid to Dependent Children*

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“Man in the house” or “substitute father” laws cut aid to families if the mother cohabitated with a man who was not the children’s father. They were based on the assumption that the man could or should provide for the children even if he had no legal obligation to the child, was a casual romantic partner, had little or no income, or was simply a boarder.⁵⁷

Policymakers disproportionately implemented these policies in jurisdictions with high Black populations. Several states and localities created special units in their ADC agencies to conduct home searches, sometimes called “midnight raids,” in search of a cohabitating man in the home. These included Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., Cuyahoga County, Ohio (which encompasses Cleveland), Wayne County, Michigan (which encompasses Detroit), and the states of Illinois and Pennsylvania.⁵⁸ ADC/AFDC agencies often cut off families based on tenuous evidence that a cohabiting man was a romantic partner or had the resources to provide for the children.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Bell, p. 86.

⁵⁸ Nadasen, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Bell, pp. 78-79.

In addition, white lawmakers in several states proposed eugenic legislation in the late 1950s and the 1960s calling for sterilization of unmarried ADC/AFDC mothers. Often they cited Black mothers in particular: “The negro woman, because of child welfare assistance, [is] making it a business, in some cases of giving birth to illegitimate children,” Mississippi State Representative David H. Glass argued.⁶⁰ In 1958, he introduced a bill to allow a court to order sterilization for women who give birth to a “second or subsequent illegitimate child,” implicitly targeting mothers receiving ADC/AFDC benefits. Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Tennessee, and Virginia considered similar proposals for compulsory sterilization of mothers receiving ADC/AFDC benefits who had children while unmarried. No state enacted a sterilization proposal for ADC/AFDC mothers, but many states operated sterilization programs targeting people of color, people in poverty, people with mental illness, and others, some of which continued into the 1970s.⁶¹

Southern states also used ADC to exert economic control over Black families. So-called “farm policies” in a number of states lowered or cut off ADC benefits during planting and harvest seasons to coerce Black parents to work in agriculture even if no paying jobs were available.⁶² For instance, Louisiana’s 1943 policy denied assistance during the cotton-picking season to both newly applying families and those already receiving assistance.⁶³ Beyond the South, agricultural communities in Illinois and New Jersey also adopted farm policies that targeted Black families.⁶⁴

Some policymakers in the North also denounced Black migrants moving to their cities, who they claimed were only seeking more generous ADC benefits. Newburgh, New York, was ground zero for this attack. Blaming “Southern outsiders” seeking cash assistance for the decline in the city’s standard of living, the city council adopted a “thirteen-point welfare code” that, among other things, required all ADC applicants who were new to Newburgh to provide evidence that they had a concrete offer of employment. The ensuing controversy, which the media dubbed the “Battle of Newburgh,” gained national attention, and a court order permanently blocked the new rules.⁶⁵

1960s and 1970s: Federalizing Eligibility But Adding Work Requirements

The 1960s and 1970s saw enactment of significant civil rights legislation and expansions in economic support programs as part of the War on Poverty. These gains reflected growing recognition that all Americans weren’t sharing fully in the postwar prosperity. While white families garnered most of the initial attention in poverty debates in the early 1960s, the political work of Black activists, urban uprisings, and the rise in the number of Black families receiving AFDC focused more of the nation’s attention on poverty among Black people.

⁶⁰ Julius Paul, “The Return of Punitive Sterilization Proposals: Current Attacks on Illegitimacy and the AFDC Program,” *Law & Society Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, August 1968, p. 89, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3052796>.

⁶¹ Lisa Ko, “Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs In the United States,” PBS, January 29, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/>.

⁶² Bell, p. 46.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Francis Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, Vintage Books, 1971, p. 143; Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present*, Routledge 2018, p. 254.

⁶⁵ Minoff; Tamara Boussac, “Reconsidering the local politics of welfare: The example of the Newburgh Controversy (1961-1962),” *Revue Française d’Études Américaines*, Vol. 160, No. 3, July 2019, pp. 129-142, <https://www.cairn-int.info/revue-revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2019-3-page-129.htm>.

Historically, Black women have always had higher work rates than white women⁶⁶ but were often segregated into jobs with low pay, such as domestic service. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, opened up new economic opportunities for Black and other women. More Black women moved into higher-paying, professional jobs in the 1970s, though many continued to do the same work they had always done. The entry of more married white mothers into the labor market in the 1970s contributed to the rise of jobs in commercial child care centers, many of which Black women filled.⁶⁷ Those jobs were unstable and low paid. And, even before a recession hit in 1973, the unemployment rate for Black women exceeded the rate for the country overall.⁶⁸ Black and other single mothers who could not find work or get unemployment insurance increasingly applied for AFDC.

With expanded eligibility and continued need among many single mothers in poverty, the AFDC caseload grew from roughly 1.3 million families in 1967 to about 3.6 million in 1977.⁶⁹ While the *number* of AFDC Black families grew in this decade, it rose in proportion to the caseload; Black families' *share* of the program dropped slightly, from 44 percent 1967 to 43 percent in 1977.⁷⁰ (See Figure 4.) Nevertheless, the perception of skyrocketing growth of Black families receiving AFDC and the program's increased costs, along with the social unrest in Black communities, alarmed some national policymakers and affected media coverage of poverty-related issues. One of the main legislative responses was greater focus on work for AFDC recipients.

⁶⁶ Nina Banks, "Black women's labor market history reveals deep-seated race and gender discrimination," Economic Policy Institute, 2019, <https://www.epi.org/blog/black-womens-labor-market-history-reveals-deep-seated-race-and-gender-discrimination/>.

⁶⁷ Banks; Sally Lloyd *et al.*, pp. 17-18.

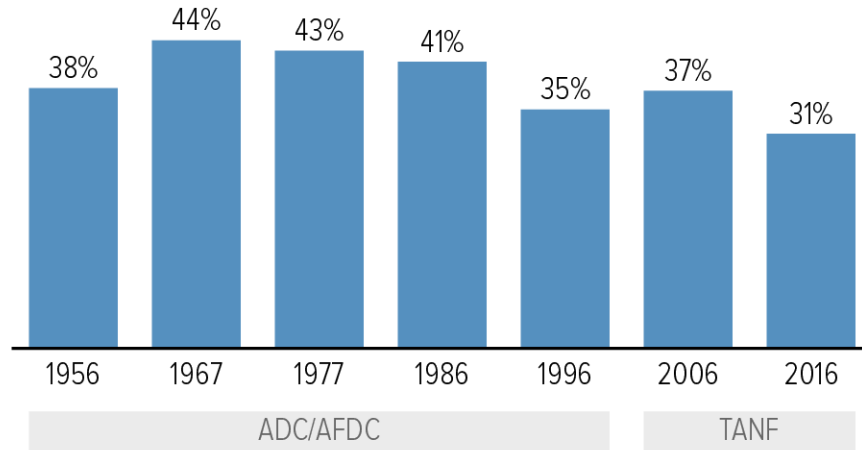
⁶⁸ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Unemployment Rate [UNRATE]," retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, updated January 1, 2021, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/graph/?g=BBvI>.

⁶⁹ 1967 data from Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's Characteristics of Families receiving AFDC, found in Turner 1993; 1977 data from the Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/data/caseload-data-1977-afdc-total>.

⁷⁰ 1967 data from Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's Characteristics of Families receiving AFDC, found in Turner 1993; 1977 data found in Duvall *et al.*, "Aid to Families with Dependent Children: Characteristics of Recipients in 1979," Social Security Bulletin, April 1982, <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v45n4/v45n4p3.pdf>.

FIGURE 4

Black Families' Share of Cash Assistance Recipients Consistently Below 50 Percent



Note: ADC = Aid to Dependent Children; AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children; TANF = Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. 1956 data from Nov. 1955 and May 1956.

Source = 1956 and 1967 data from Department of Health Education and Welfare's Characteristics of Families Receiving AFDC found in Bobbie Green Turner, *Federal/State Aid to Dependent Children Program and Its Benefits to Black Children in America, 1935-1985*, Garland Publishing, Inc. 1993. 1977 data found in Duvall et al. "Aid to Families With Dependent Children: Characteristics of Recipients in 1979," *Social Security Bulletin*, April 1982, <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v45n4/v45n4p3.pdf>. 1986 - 2016 data from Health and Human Services characteristics and caseload data

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Federalization of AFDC Eligibility Marked Major Step Forward

In the early 1960s, federal administrators started taking a harder line to limit state flexibility over AFDC eligibility. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) had long been concerned about states denying access to Black families and families with unmarried mothers, but it had done little to end discriminatory state practices and had limited tools to encourage states to change their policies.⁷¹ Not until the 1960s did HEW take a firm stance. In response to Louisiana's denial of AFDC support to thousands of Black children, HEW issued an administrative rule in 1960 (known as the Flemming rule after HEW head Arthur Flemming) that states could not ignore the needs of the child if the home was determined to be "unsuitable;" state AFDC agencies had to help make the home suitable or move the child to more suitable living conditions, or risk loss of federal funding.⁷² This was HEW's firmest rule to date, but it did not end all policies restricting access for Black and unwed mothers such as "farm policies" and "man in the house" rules.

Also in the 1960s, the welfare rights movement made substantial progress in expanding AFDC eligibility. A key leader of the welfare rights movement was the National Welfare Rights

⁷¹ Bell.

⁷² George Hoshino, "Money and Morality: Income Security and Personal Social Services," *Social Work*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1971, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23710945?seq=1>; O'Neill Murray and Gesirich,

Organization (NWRO); it was created in 1966 when organizers brought together Black, brown, and white mothers receiving cash assistance who had been organizing locally for dignity and more benefits since the late 1950s.⁷³ To ensure that Black families could access assistance, the NWRO sought to end discriminatory practices by pressuring state and local AFDC agencies to increase benefits and stop denials.

The NWRO not only agitated on the ground, but also supported the efforts of lawyers in the movement pushing for greater enforcement of federal eligibility standards in the courts.⁷⁴ They won key Supreme Court cases that ended some of the most harmful state eligibility rules discriminating against Black families and precluded states from restricting eligibility. The Court's 1968 ruling in *King v. Smith*, for example, struck down Alabama's "substitute father" policy and eliminated other "man in the house" rules; it also barred states from instituting additional eligibility rules, thereby shifting the power to determine eligibility restrictions from the states to the federal government.⁷⁵ And in *Goldberg v. Kelly* (1970), the Court ruled that AFDC recipients had a right to a hearing before their benefits were terminated, among other due process measures.⁷⁶ The NWRO then pushed for enforcement of these protections when some states resisted changing their policies.⁷⁷

These rulings effectively ended many states' arbitrary eligibility policies and processes and barred states from adding work or behavioral requirements or eligibility policies that were more restrictive than federal law. Federalization of AFDC eligibility had its limits, however; states retained control over benefit levels, which varied widely across states and tended to be lower in states with higher Black populations.⁷⁸ Also, almost all states allowed benefits to decline in inflation-adjusted terms between the 1970s and 1990s.⁷⁹

Harmful Narratives About Black Single Mothers Drove Cash Assistance Debate

Though Black families never made up a majority of the AFDC caseload, the news media increasingly associated the program with Black families starting in the mid-1960s. Incidents in Louisiana and Newburgh, New York, involving efforts to prevent Black families from accessing the program gained national attention. Also, after the urban uprisings of the mid-1960s, news stories about waste, fraud, or abuse in public assistance programs (especially in AFDC) increasingly featured

⁷³ Nadasen, p. 3.

⁷⁴ Martha F. Davis, *Brutal Need: Lawyers and the Welfare Rights Movement, 1960-1973*, Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 51, 75, 93.

⁷⁵ *King v. Smith*, 392 U.S. 309, 1968, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/392/309/>.

⁷⁶ *Goldberg v. Kelly*, 397 U.S. 254, 1970, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/397/254/>.

⁷⁷ Davis, pp. 136-137.

⁷⁸ See Larry L. Orr, "Income Transfers as a Public Good: An Application to AFDC," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3, 1976, pp. 359-371, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1828169>; Gerald C. Wright, Jr., "Racism and Welfare Policy in America," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 4, 1970, pp. 718-730, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42859699>; Christopher Howard, "The American Welfare State, or States?" *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 1999, pp. 421-442, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/449226>; Ben Lennox Kail and Marc Dixon, "The Uneven Patterning of Welfare Benefits at the Twilight of AFDC: Accessing the Influence of Institutions, Race, and Citizen Preferences," *Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 52, 2011, pp. 376-399.

⁷⁹ Ali Safawi, "Family Cash Assistance Programs Marked by Historical Racism, Especially in South," CBPP, October 22, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/family-cash-assistance-programs-marked-by-historical-racism-especially-in-south>.

images of Black people, while stories about recessions and increased need were likelier to feature images of white people.⁸⁰

In 1965, a major report from Assistant Labor Secretary Daniel Patrick Moynihan that elevated racist and sexist ideas about Black motherhood and families represented the shifting of the public discourse about poverty. “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action,” more commonly known as the “Moynihan report,” stated, “[i]n essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole.”⁸¹ Though the report acknowledged that subjugation and discrimination had limited Black men’s economic advancement, it blamed Black single mothers for continued poverty and crime in Black communities and charged that women-led families perpetuated a culture of “pathologies.”⁸²

The Moynihan report, which attributed the growth of AFDC caseloads to the deficient values of the Black community, helped change the mainstream public debate over the causes of poverty from economic to cultural explanations, and conservative scholars like Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead later used the “culture of poverty” as a rationale for their proposals to narrow or end AFDC. Though the report focused on Black fathers, it likely furthered calls from both conservative and liberal policymakers for changes to AFDC, including work requirements for Black and other mothers on the program.⁸³

With AFDC becoming closely associated with stereotypes of Black mothers, efforts to expand cash assistance met fierce criticism. Opponents of President Nixon’s proposed Family Assistance Program (FAP), which would have replaced AFDC with a minimum basic income for married or unmarried households that would have been higher than AFDC benefits in some states and included work requirements and work incentives, invoked racist stereotypes about Black women’s work ethic echoing back to the justifications for enslavement.⁸⁴ For example, Senator Russell Long of Louisiana, fearing that some poor people would opt for FAP benefits over low-wage jobs, lamented, “I can’t get anybody to iron my shirts.”⁸⁵

Media outlets and some policymakers reinforced these perceptions, claiming there was a “welfare crisis” of growing costs supporting “undeserving” families. For example, a 1971 *U.S. News & World Report* article entitled “Welfare Out of Control” charged that AFDC “encourages illegitimacy among

⁸⁰ Martin Gilens, “How the Poor Became Black: The Racialization of American Poverty in the Mass Media” in Sanford F. Schram, Joe Soss, and Richard C. Fording (eds.), *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, The University of Michigan Press, 2003, p. 104, <https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/9780472068319-ch4.pdf>.

⁸¹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” U.S. Department of Labor Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965, Ch. 4, <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan/moynchapter4>.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, p. 47; Nadasen, p. 145.

⁸⁴ The NWRO and some liberals also attacked FAP for not having high enough benefits and for requiring single mothers to work. See Nadasen, pp.171-181.

⁸⁵ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, p. 55.

those who are least equipped to bring up children”⁸⁶ and implied that families in the “slum” cheated to get on welfare.⁸⁷ In a 1976 campaign rally, presidential candidate Ronald Reagan defended his plan to cut AFDC and other social programs (which he had done as governor of California⁸⁸) by citing the example of a woman named Linda Taylor,⁸⁹ who used numerous false identities to collect benefits from various public sources and would later be known as the “welfare queen.”

Later depictions of this “welfare queen” stereotype embodied many of the harmful narratives about Black women in a single phrase: “welfare queens” were lazy cheats who irresponsibly had a lot of children and relied on and abused public aid. (See Appendix 2.) These stereotypes weakened public support for AFDC. By 1976, 89 percent of Americans believed that “the criteria for getting on welfare are not tight enough,” while 85 percent thought that “too many people on welfare cheat by getting money they are not entitled to.”⁹⁰

In reality, families were not living comfortably on cash aid. Even with cash assistance and food assistance, families in poverty struggled to afford the basics. Between the early 1970s and early 1980s, AFDC benefits started shrinking in inflation-adjusted terms even as housing costs rose.⁹¹ By 1980, the maximum AFDC benefit didn’t lift a family of three out of poverty in any state.⁹²

Work Program Expansion and Tying Eligibility to Work

The 1960s and 1970s saw the first steps toward the policies we see today in TANF that take away assistance from families where an adult doesn’t meet a work requirement. The entry of more mothers, especially white mothers, into the workforce shifted public expectations about single mothers and work outside the home. Additionally, growing media attention to a “welfare crisis” and claims that AFDC incentivized women not to marry or work pressured federal policymakers to adopt a new approach to single mothers living in poverty.⁹³ Many began moving away from the idea that AFDC mothers’ primary responsibility should be caring for their children in the home, rather than working.

⁸⁶ “Welfare Out of Control — Story of Financial Crisis Cities Face,” *U.S. News & World Report*, February 8, 1971, pp. 30-34; found in Nadasen Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 169-171.

⁸⁷ States had initiated efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to root out fraud, but those actions turned up very little if any evidence of fraud. See Bell, pp. 61-63.

⁸⁸ Wallace Turner, “Reagan Cuts \$503-Million From the Budget Passed by California Legislature,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/04/archives/reagan-cuts-503million-from-the-budget-passed-by-california.html>.

⁸⁹ Sam Dolnick, “The Life and Crimes of America’s Original ‘Welfare Queen,’” *New York Times*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/20/books/review/josh-levin-queen-linda-taylor.html>.

⁹⁰ Lisbeth B. Schorr, “Piecing together the real woman behind Reagan’s ‘welfare queen,’” *Washington Post*, May 31, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/piecing-together-the-real-woman-behind-reagans-welfare-queen/2019/05/31/71adef3a-70f1-11e9-9f06-5fc2ee80027a_story.html.

⁹¹ U.S. House Select Committee on Hunger, “Obtaining food: shopping constraints on the poor,” December 1987, pp. 2-3, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31210011095013&view=1up&seq=8>.

⁹² CBPP analysis of 1980 AFDC benefit levels and 1980 Poverty Guidelines. Benefit level data from the University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research. Poverty guidelines from the Social Security Administration, “Annual Statistical Supplement, 2020,” Table 3.E8: Poverty guidelines for families of specified size, 1965–2020 (in dollars), <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/supplement/2020/3e.html#table3.e8>.

⁹³ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 46-47.

Liberal Democrats in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations tried to find a balance between encouraging work and protecting single mothers' right to care for their children instead of being required to work for pay outside the home.⁹⁴ In contrast, Southern Democrats, emboldened by AFDC's negative media attention, favored a broader work focus for AFDC mothers. In 1967, Democratic Representative Wilbur Mills from Arkansas⁹⁵ pushed through Congress his Work Incentive Program or WIN, which required states to establish work programs for AFDC recipients and allowed recipients to earn income without losing their benefits on a dollar-for-dollar basis.⁹⁶ In 1971, Senator Herman Talmadge, former Georgia governor and long-time segregationist,⁹⁷ successfully amended the Social Security Act to expand AFDC's work requirement: mothers with no children under age 6 had to register for work programs and accept any available job or else face a benefit reduction.⁹⁸

The NWRO pushed back forcefully against WIN and work requirements,⁹⁹ charging that the training and job placement provided under WIN were useless because they often placed women into work that Black women and other women in poverty had always done, such as cooking and cleaning.¹⁰⁰ Many NWRO leaders compared WIN to enslavement and said mothers did not need to be coerced to work.¹⁰¹ Because AFDC benefits were so meager, mothers on AFDC worked when they could, but formal child care was still largely unavailable.¹⁰² Even in good economic times, Black

⁹⁴ President Kennedy made two attempts at compromise: 1) creating the AFDC-Unemployed Parent (AFDC-UP) program, which allowed married couples with unemployed fathers to qualify for aid so long as the father entered work training; and 2) expanding psychosocial counseling and social services aimed at rehabilitating mothers. Neither initiative persuaded Southern Democrats that stricter work requirements weren't needed, in part because they failed to lower the caseload. States had the option to implement these new policies, but no Southern states did so by the end of the decade. Years later, the federal government mandated that states create AFDC-UP programs. Eva Bertram, "Democratic Divisions in the 1960s and the Road to Welfare Reform," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 126, No. 4, Winter 2011-12.

⁹⁵ Bertram. Rep. Wilbur Mills was a signatory of the Southern Manifesto, which protested desegregation. See Congressional Record, 84th Congress Second Session. Vol. 102, part 4, Governmental Printing Office, 1956, reproduced in University of Massachusetts History Club, "Events: Southern Manifesto," African American Civil Rights Movement, 2017, <http://www.african-american-civil-rights.org/southern-manifesto/>.

⁹⁶ The NWRO, whose members were mostly Black, protested the bill. In hearings for the legislation, Sen. Long responded to the NWRO criticism saying they had time to protests but not, "to pick a beer can off the street . . . in front of their own house or catch a rat." He continued that they "won't do anything except produce more children for the public to pay for at taxpayers' expense." Russell Long, Senate Committee on Finance, "Hearings on H.R. 12080, Social Security Amendments of 1967, Ninetieth Congress, First Session," September 21, 1967, p. 1648, in Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, p. 47. See also Gene Falk, "The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant: A Legislative History," Congressional Research Service, updated November 30, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44668.pdf>.

⁹⁷ "Herman Talmadge (1913-2002)," New Georgia Encyclopedia, August 14, 2020, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/government-politics/herman-talmadge-1913-2002>.

⁹⁸ Office of Assistance Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "A Brief History of the AFDC Program," <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/167036/1history.pdf>.

⁹⁹ Nadasen, pp. 136, 178-179.

¹⁰⁰ See Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 34-35; Abramovitz, pp. 260-261.

¹⁰¹ Nadasen, p. 137.

¹⁰² WIN did include some funding for day care centers, but not enough to meet the need.

women had higher unemployment rates than the country as a whole.¹⁰³ A 1977 study found that WIN did not improve AFDC families' circumstances and attributed its failure to labor market barriers, not lack of work ethic.¹⁰⁴

To improve economic security for single mothers and their children, NWRO Executive Director Johnnie Tillmon called for a living wage and passage of the NWRO's Guaranteed Adequate Income¹⁰⁵ proposal to assist families at times when parents could not work or their earnings were not enough.¹⁰⁶

1980s and 1990s: "Personal Responsibility" and Return of State Control

By the start of the 1980s, both Republican and Democratic policymakers believed that AFDC encouraged dependency and undermined family values and recipients' work ethic.¹⁰⁷ A powerful conservative coalition emerged to push for lower taxes and smaller government; its members strongly supported cutting anti-poverty programs after their growth in the 1960s and 1970s. The media continued to racialize AFDC as a backdrop to debates surrounding "welfare reform." In the 1990s, sensationalized cases of child abuse in Black and Latinx families receiving AFDC were covered in a way that aligned with the pre-established racist narratives that the program supported "unfit" mothers.¹⁰⁸

While public figures largely abandoned overtly racist language in public, many instead used dog whistles such as "illegitimate births," "inner city," and "crime" to invoke negative images of Black families and communities and undermine support for cash assistance.¹⁰⁹ And they crafted seemingly race-neutral ideas like "work requirements" and "personal responsibility" to describe their solutions. The news media and some politicians had already linked AFDC to stereotypes about Black women, as noted above; some also blamed urban poverty and crime on Black unwed mothers. Therefore, the public understood which group was the target of the new policy proposals.¹¹⁰

The racist rhetoric and narratives were not limited to the Republican Party. President Clinton would eventually justify his Administration's policies, which included acceptance of arbitrary time

¹⁰³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

¹⁰⁴ Leonard Goodwin, "What Has Been Learned from the Work Incentive Program and Related Experiences: A Review of Research with Policy Implications. Final Report," National Technical Information Service, 1977, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED136011.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ The NWRO's 1970 Guaranteed Adequate Income proposed providing \$5,500 a year (about \$35,000 in 2021 dollars) to a family of four with a head of household who was not working. Working families could receive federal assistance until their annual income reached \$10,000. See Nadasen, p. 180.

¹⁰⁶ Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare is a Women's Issue," *Ms. Magazine*, Spring 1972, <https://msmagazine.com/2021/03/25/welfare-is-a-womens-issue-ms-magazine-spring-1972/>.

¹⁰⁷ Nadasen, Mittelstadt, and Chappell, pp. 60-64.

¹⁰⁸ Williams.

¹⁰⁹ Martin Gilens, "Race Coding and White Opposition to Welfare," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1996. See also Ian Haney Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹¹⁰ Rick Perlstein, "Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy," *The Nation*, November 13, 2012, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/>.

limits on cash assistance and work requirements that would hurt many people, by claiming that “welfare reform” would end the racial politics then driving anti-poverty policy.¹¹¹ Yet in the photo of him signing the legislation that created TANF, he was flanked by two Black mothers and former AFDC recipients, Lillie Harden and Penelope Howard.¹¹²

Conservative intellectuals and think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute pushed for dramatic cuts in anti-poverty programs.¹¹³ For example, scholars like Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead, who had both made racist arguments about the “inferiority” of Black and Latinx people,¹¹⁴ faulted AFDC and other programs for reinforcing a “culture of poverty,” especially among communities of color.¹¹⁵ Murray blamed anti-poverty programs for the decline of the traditional nuclear family and the rise of births to unmarried mothers, particularly Black mothers. He recommended eliminating AFDC for non-disabled adults and insisted they work, regardless of job quality or compensation — echoing Southern policymakers’ efforts to preserve the Black low-wage labor force in the early 20th century. Mead did not go as far as calling for ending the program, but instead argued for more paternalism and control of AFDC families, and that parents should be required to meet “social obligations” like work to receive assistance.¹¹⁶

Yet contemporary research did not support the thesis that programs like AFDC led to increased rates of Black children born outside marriage. A 1984 report by social policy researchers David Ellwood and Mary Jo Bane found no connection between state benefit levels and the rates of

¹¹¹ Minoff.

¹¹² Gene Demby, “The Mothers Who Fought To Radically Reimagine Welfare,” NPR, June 9, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/06/09/730684320/the-mothers-who-fought-to-radically-reimagine-welfare>.

¹¹³ Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*, University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 31.

¹¹⁴ In *The Bell Curve*, Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein argued that Black and Latinx people have lower IQs than white and Asian people and are more likely to commit crime and utilize public aid programs. They wrote, “The professional consensus is that the United States has experienced dysgenic pressures throughout either most of the century (the optimists) or all of the century (the pessimists). Women of all races and ethnic groups follow this pattern in similar fashion. There is some evidence that blacks and Latinos are experiencing even more severe dysgenic pressures than whites, which could lead to further divergence between whites and other groups in future generations.” Some of the research they cited was funded by the Pioneer Fund, which has ties to the pseudo-science of eugenics and to Nazism. See Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/charles-murray>.

A 2020 paper by Lawrence Mead, later retracted by its publisher, stated, “Today, the seriously poor are mostly black and Hispanics, and the main reason is cultural difference. *The great fact is that these groups did not come from Europe*. Fifty years after civil rights, their main problem is no longer racial discrimination by other people but rather that they face an individualist culture that they are unprepared for. Their native stance toward life is much more passive than the American norm. In America, they face less hardship than they did where they came from, but also more competition. They must strive to get ahead in school and the workplace while avoiding crime and personal problems. They also must take much more responsibility for themselves than they did before. In short, they have to become more individualist before they can ‘make it’ in America. So they are at a disadvantage competing with the European groups — even if they face no mistreatment on racial grounds.” See Lawrence Mead, “Poverty and Culture,” <https://www.docdroid.net/9KPOrmt/poverty-and-culture-pdf>.

¹¹⁵ Paul Gorski, “The Myth of the Culture of Poverty,” in Marge Scherer (ed.), *On Poverty and Learning*.

¹¹⁶ Nadasen.

children born outside marriage.¹¹⁷ Other studies supported this finding.¹¹⁸ And, as noted, the real value of benefits started declining in the 1970s even as rates of children born outside of marriage rose.¹¹⁹ “Welfare simply does not appear to be the underlying cause of the dramatic changes in family structure of the past few decades,” Elwood and Bane concluded.¹²⁰

The reality was that many Black women were struggling to work and/or care for children amid many larger forces that AFDC’s critics ignored. Over the previous few decades, adults had delayed marriage longer and longer.¹²¹ Birth rates among teenage girls had declined since mid-century,¹²² perhaps due to the decline in their marriage rates, but birth rates grew for Black and white teenage girls in the 1980s and 1990s.¹²³ At the same time, the economy was changing in ways that made it harder for families to maintain economic stability. Deindustrialization in urban areas eliminated stable, well-paying jobs for many Black men, making it difficult to provide for their families.¹²⁴ Black women were still overrepresented in lower-paying service jobs such as housekeeping, child care, and food service, which tended to be unstable.¹²⁵ Also, the real value of wages started declining in the 1970s, making it even harder for workers with low earnings to make ends meet.¹²⁶ These factors increased income instability among people with the lowest incomes.¹²⁷

During the 1980s, people of color with low incomes were likelier to face increased income volatility and to be between jobs.¹²⁸ Black women were frequently among the last to recover from

¹¹⁷ David T. Ellwood and Mary Jo Bane, “Impact of AFDC on Family Structure and Living Arrangements,” prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1984, <https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB84196138.xhtml>.

¹¹⁸ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 77-81.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-67.

¹²⁰ Ellwood and Bane.

¹²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Table MS-2 Median age at first marriage: 1890 to present,” December 2020, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html>.

¹²² Gretchen Livingston and Deja Thomas, “Why is the teen birth rate falling?” Pew Research Center, August 2, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/02/why-is-the-teen-birth-rate-falling/>.

¹²³ Stephanie J. Ventura, Sally C. Curtin, and T. J. Mathews, “Teenage Births in the United States: National and State Trends, 1990–96,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Vital Statistics, 1998, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/misc/teenbrth.pdf>.

¹²⁴ Wilson.

¹²⁵ Banks; Martina Hund-Mejean and Marcela Escobari, “Our employment system has failed low-wage workers. How can we rebuild?” Brookings, April 28, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/04/28/our-employment-system-is-failing-low-wage-workers-how-do-we-make-it-more-resilient/>.

¹²⁶ Drew Desilver, “For most U.S. workers, real wages have barely budged in decades,” Pew Research Center, August 7, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/07/for-most-us-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>.

¹²⁷ Lisa A. Gennetian *et al.*, “Income Level and Volatility by Children’s Race and Hispanic Ethnicity,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 81, No. 1, February 2019; Bradley L. Hardy, “Addressing income volatility in the United States: Flexible policy solutions for changing economic circumstances,” Washington Center for Equitable Growth, October 31, 2016.

¹²⁸ Gennetian *et al.*; Bradley L. Hardy, “Income Instability and the Response of the Safety Net,” *Contemporary Economic Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2017; David A. Jaeger and Ann Huff Stevens, “Is Job Stability in the United States Falling?”

recessions, including those of the early 1980s and early 1990s.¹²⁹ Also, new crime laws and mass incarceration targeted Black people, further destabilizing Black families and communities throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, there remained deep inequities in education and housing, resulting in Black children often attending under-resourced schools and continued disparities in the share of Black and white people who attained a four-year college degree at a time when returns to higher education were growing. The cuts to AFDC and eventual creation of TANF disregarded these realities.

Legislative Changes of 1980s

Several bills enacted during the 1980s included fiscally driven AFDC cuts and modest changes to work programs and related services. The two most significant bills were both influenced by racist attitudes toward cash assistance recipients.

President Reagan gained support for cutting public aid programs by repeating the “welfare queen” trope and raising the specter of widespread waste, fraud, and abuse.¹³⁰ “[I]n addition to collecting welfare under 123 different names, she also had 55 Social Security cards,” he said in 1981, referring to Linda Taylor, who had been convicted of welfare fraud. (See above.) “[T]here’s much more of [this type of fraud] than anyone realizes,” he claimed.¹³¹ The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 cut AFDC spending, but by limiting eligibility rather than reducing supposed fraud. For example, some of its cuts limited work incentives, ironically cutting off many *working* mothers in the name of “targeting” help to those who needed it most. The changes caused about 1 in 6 families to lose some or all of their benefits.¹³² The law also expanded states’ flexibility to design their own work programs and to require recipients to participate in unpaid community service or work programs in exchange for their AFDC benefit.

In Reagan’s second inaugural address in 1985, he claimed he wanted to help families in poverty “escape the spider’s web of dependency.”¹³³ His second attempt to change AFDC furthered the focus on work programs. The 1988 Family Support Act (FSA) established the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training program (JOBS) to replace WIN and allowed states to require mothers with children over age 3 (the previous rule was over age 6) to participate in work, education, or

Reconciling Trends in the Current Population Survey and Panel Study of Income Dynamics,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 6650, 1998, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w6650/w6650.pdf.

¹²⁹ Janelle Jones, “Black Women Best,” Data for Progress, July 15, 2020, <https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2020/7/15/black-women-best>

¹³⁰ Dolnick.

¹³¹ Josh Levin, “The Welfare Queen,” *Slate*, December 19, 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2013/12/linda_taylor_welfare_queen_ronald_reagan_made_her_a_notorious_american_villain.html.

¹³² Stephen Kulis, “Emotional Distress Following AFDC Cutbacks,” *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 69, 1988, http://www.public.asu.edu/~atssk/ssk_ssq88.pdf.

¹³³ Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer, “Ronald Reagan’s ‘welfare queen’ myth: How the Gipper kickstarted the war on the working poor,” *Salon*, September 27, 2015, https://www.salon.com/2015/09/27/ronald_reagans_welfare_queen_myth_how_the_gipper_kickstarted_the_war_on_the_working_poor/.

training. Mothers not meeting these requirements could have their grant reduced.¹³⁴ There were some more positive advances: the FSA guaranteed child care (with federal matching funding) for parents receiving AFDC who were working or in education or training programs, as well as transitional child care for up to one year after a family left AFDC for employment — a recognition that parents need child care in order to work.¹³⁵ However, efforts to create federal requirements on the adequacy of benefit levels were rejected.¹³⁶ The FSA’s approach of marrying more restrictive work requirements with added resources was overshadowed by calls for more radical changes within just a few years.

“Ending Welfare as We Know It”

The 1990s debate surrounding AFDC policy was, like previous such debates, deeply racialized. Proponents of dramatic changes often compared them to ending slavery. Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist stated in 1993, “In 1863, Lincoln freed the slaves of the Confederacy — and in 1865, all the slaves were freed. . . . [W]e can liberate America’s poor from an oppressive welfare system and help them get what they really want and the rest of us believe in: work.”¹³⁷ Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson invoked values he associated with whiteness, stating, “People in Wisconsin expect people to work — maybe it’s the old Germanic heritage, the old European heritage,”¹³⁸ while New Jersey State Representative Wayne Bryant wrote that the values of his Black Camden community need to align with the rest of the country.¹³⁹ House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich promoted his “Contract with America,” which contained radical AFDC changes as well as other proposals the Republican Party adopted for the 1994 elections, by stoking fears of the inner city: “[W]atch any major city local television news. . . . The child abuse, the rape, the murders, the cocaine dealing, the problems of American life are unbelievable. . . . [I]t is impossible to maintain American civilization with 12-year-olds having babies, 15-year-olds killing each other, 17-year-olds dying of AIDS, and 18-year-olds getting diplomas they cannot read.”¹⁴⁰

Federal control over AFDC eligibility began eroding in the late 1980s and early 1990s as states sought to impose new requirements and restrictions such as time limits, increased work requirements, and more severe penalties. Particularly in the early and mid-1990s, states sought waivers of federal law (available under section 1115 of the Social Security Act) to change benefit eligibility and requirements. Keeping with President Clinton’s campaign promise to “end welfare as

¹³⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning And Evaluation, “A Brief History of the AFDC Program,” <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/167036/1history.pdf>.

¹³⁵ Robert A. Hoppe (ed.), “The Family Support Act: Will It Work in Rural Areas?” U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development Research Report No. 83, <https://naldc.nal.usda.gov/download/CAT93503075/PDF>.

¹³⁶ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, “The Poverty Measure and AFDC,” from *Measuring Poverty: A New Approach*, 1995, p. 341, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/1995/demo/afdc.pdf>.

¹³⁷ See Mayor Norquist’s 1993 letter to President Clinton, p. 27, [0ad6d0c5d7656c8bdce0627ecb9c6913.pdf](https://www.presidentiallibraries.us/files/original/0ad6d0c5d7656c8bdce0627ecb9c6913.pdf) ([presidentiallibraries.us](https://www.presidentiallibraries.us)).

¹³⁸ Norman Atkins, “Governor Get-a-Job; Tommy Thompson,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 15, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/01/15/magazine/governor-get-a-job-tommy-thompson.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

¹³⁹ Roberts, pp. 212-213.

¹⁴⁰ See the floor statement by Newt Gingrich, 140 Cong. Rec. H9526–H9527, September 22, 1994, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1994-09-22/html/CREC-1994-09-22-pt1-PgH44.htm>.

we know it,” his Administration approved waivers in 43 states.¹⁴¹ Waivers varied by state but were often more punitive, and their work provisions more extensive, than federal policy would otherwise allow. Many programs took all cash assistance away from families that didn’t comply with work requirements and set time limits on assistance. These harsh proposals were often coupled with rules (known as expanded earnings disregards) that phased down benefits more slowly if people’s earnings rose as a way to encourage employment.

This theme of expanding the rewards to work while cutting basic assistance to people who are out of work can be seen in policy changes related to cash aid and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a refundable credit created in 1975 that supplements the earnings of families with low earnings. Policymakers expanded the EITC in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with President Clinton touting the expansion as a major accomplishment in his 1993 budget even as his Administration was approving waivers that made it harder for families in which an adult wasn’t working to get basic cash assistance.¹⁴² Together, the rise of EITC expansions and policies that take cash aid away from families when an adult doesn’t meet a work requirements show a major shift toward conditioning assistance on work.

In addition to calling for work requirements, many public officials and conservative intellectuals wanted to address the growth of births to single mothers, particularly for Black teenagers but also an increasing number of white teenagers, and AFDC’s supposed role in that growth.¹⁴³ Many state waiver plans included family caps, which denied families the standard incremental increase in their benefits to account for the added costs of meeting the needs of a child born to a family receiving AFDC. One HHS official spoke in favor of states’ family cap policies by saying the government should not reward “irresponsible” behavior.¹⁴⁴ New Jersey State Representative Wayne Bryant wrote in a *Washington Post* op-ed, “If parents are so irresponsible that they are unwilling to come to work or go to school, what makes you think they’re taking the added welfare dollars and spending them responsibly on their kids?”¹⁴⁵ He believed his state’s family cap policy and other AFDC changes would transform the lifestyles of his predominately Black hometown of Camden.¹⁴⁶

Some states considered other ways to limit AFDC mothers’ reproduction. In the early 1990s, legislators in several states proposed bills to pay teenage mothers on AFDC who agreed to have Norplant, a long-acting reversible contraceptive device, implanted in their arms. Other state

¹⁴¹ Carol Harvey, Michael J. Camasso, and Radha Jagannathan, “Evaluating Welfare Reform Waivers Under Section 1115,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Fall 2000, pp. 165-188, <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdf/10.1257/jep.14.4.165>.

¹⁴² In 1993, for example, President Clinton approved changes that expanded the EITC for families with more children. Bradley Hardy, Timothy Smeeding, and James P. Ziliak, “The Changing Safety Net for Low Income Parents and Their Children: Structural or Cyclical Changes in Income Support Policy?” *Demography*, February 2018, pp. 6-7, https://gatonweb.uky.edu/Faculty/Ziliak/HSZ_webversion_doi10.1007.pdf.

¹⁴³ Charles Murray, “The Coming White Underclass,” American Enterprise Institute, October 29, 1993, <https://www.aei.org/articles/the-coming-white-underclass/>.

¹⁴⁴ Roberts, p. 210.

¹⁴⁵ Wayne R. Bryant, “New Jersey’s Welfare Overhaul,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1995/10/01/new-jerseys-welfare-overhaul/5ed21817-4d83-47ae-950e-4c83473266fa/>.

¹⁴⁶ Roberts, pp. 212-213.

proposals (none of which passed) would require women to accept Norplant as a condition of receiving AFDC. Outside of official AFDC policy, health professionals often targeted Norplant to Black teenage mothers receiving AFDC and Medicaid; a 1990 editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* suggested it could be used to control the Black birth rate and reduce poverty.¹⁴⁷

In addition to granting state waivers, President Clinton also pursued broader “welfare reform” to deliver on his campaign slogan to “end welfare as we know it,” unveiling a proposal in 1994 that included time limits (followed by work, including an offer to be placed in an unpaid job if needed).¹⁴⁸ Just months later, however, Republicans and Speaker Newt Gingrich took control of the House and became the drivers of the policy and process. The “Contract with America” called for dismantling AFDC, framing the issue as “personal responsibility” and that if people living in poverty had jobs and got married or paid child support, their families would no longer need cash assistance. (It didn’t mention that jobs were not always available or that many paid very low wages.) One Republican bill introduced in 1995 included a state option to deny cash aid to young unwed mothers and a state option to establish orphanages.¹⁴⁹ Proposals such as these were not too distant from the racist “suitable home” laws and “farm policies” that predominated in the South in mid-century.

Congressional efforts to pass legislation lasted over 18 months, with President Clinton vetoing two bills before signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) in August 1996.¹⁵⁰ PRWORA replaced AFDC with the TANF block grant, wiping out federal eligibility rules and stating that cash assistance was not an entitlement to any individual or family.

TANF’s four main purposes reflected the rhetoric of the “reform” era of the 1990s.

1. Provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives.
2. End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage.
3. Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies.
4. Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

The TANF block grant is fixed in dollar terms but gives states nearly full control over how they can spend it, within the broad parameters of those four purposes. TANF largely allows states to set their own eligibility policies and work and behavioral requirements and thus to reverse the gains in the 1960s and 1970s from federalizing eligibility rules. States face some restrictions and penalties, but these generally limit their ability to be generous, not to restrict access; for example, they cannot use federal funds to provide cash assistance for more than 60 months or to serve most lawfully present immigrants for five years after their arrival. TANF includes increased work requirements on recipients as well as work participation rates that states must achieve.

¹⁴⁷ Roberts, pp. 114-115.

¹⁴⁸ Jason DeParle, *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare*, Penguin Books, 2005, pp. 101-122.

¹⁴⁹ Personal Responsibility Act of 1995, H.R. 4, <https://www.congress.gov/104/bills/hr4/BILLS-104hr4ih.pdf>.

Both the fixed funding and the state work participation rate requirements were designed to give states strong incentives to reduce caseloads. States responded by making it harder for families to successfully apply for TANF and easier for families to lose all assistance, including through the use of sanction policies that take all assistance away from an entire family if a parent doesn't meet a work requirement. TANF's creation was indeed the end of "welfare as we know it."

Embedded Racism, State Control Have Led to Weak Program for All Families, But Black Families Are Disproportionately Affected

TANF does not work well for most families experiencing poverty and does the least for Black families. Nationally, the number of families receiving AFDC/TANF fell by 76 percent between 1996 and 2019, from 4.4 million to 1.1 million.¹⁵¹ In 1996, 68 families with children received benefits for every 100 families in poverty; by 2019, that figure had dropped to 23, nearly the lowest TANF-to-poverty ratio in the program's history. TANF cash assistance has all but disappeared in some places due to state actions. Fourteen states have a TANF-to-poverty ratio of 10 or fewer, and these states have higher shares of the nation's Black children than of Latinx or white children.¹⁵² Below are some of the ways states have made cash assistance programs for families with children worse under TANF.

Already Low Benefits Have Lost Value

As noted, in 1935 Southern lawmakers demanded state control over ADC benefits so they could maintain a Black labor pool with few alternatives to low-wage work. States used this control to keep benefits weak in later decades. States with large Black populations had lower average AFDC benefits than states with smaller Black populations and Southern states consistently had among the lowest benefits, research found.¹⁵³ Also, the far broader flexibility that states gained under the TANF block grant has allowed them to divert savings in their cash aid programs to fund other state priorities. As caseloads declined under TANF, states generally didn't invest the savings to provide more adequate cash assistance. In fact, benefits under TANF have lost value in nearly all states and in some states are below 1996 levels even before adjusting for inflation.

Since 1996, 33 states' benefits have lost at least 20 percent of their purchasing power. In 2020, benefits in nearly every state were below half of the federal poverty line, or below \$905 a month for a family of three. Eighteen states, 14 of which are in the South, had benefit levels at or below 20 percent of the poverty line — that is, \$362 a month or less for a family of three. Fifty-five percent of the nation's Black children live in the 18 states with the lowest benefits, compared to 41 percent of Latinx children and 40 percent of white children.¹⁵⁴ Mississippi is a prime example of TANF's failure to meet the needs of Black children: the state has a child poverty rate of 28 percent and a Black child

¹⁵¹ Most TANF cases today are "child-only" cases, where the parent or caregiver is not included in the benefit.

¹⁵² Laura Meyer and Ife Floyd, "Cash Assistance Should Reach Millions More Families to Lessen Hardship: Families' Access Limited by Policies Rooted in Racism," CBPP, November 30, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/cash-assistance-should-reach-millions-more-families-to-lessen>.

¹⁵³ See Orr; Wright; Howard; Kail and Dixon.

¹⁵⁴ Safawi and Floyd.

poverty rate of 43 percent¹⁵⁵ but its maximum TANF benefit was, until April 2021, the lowest in the country.¹⁵⁶

TANF Work Requirements Cause Harm, Especially for Black Women

Despite TANF proponents' pro-work rhetoric, neither the federal statute nor state implementation efforts demonstrated a commitment to giving participants a meaningful, effective connection to permanent employment with adequate wages. Cash assistance programs that focus up front on employment and take assistance away from parents who aren't able to meet a work requirement do little if anything to improve employment outcomes over the long term, research shows. They also leave many families without needed assistance to make ends meet. A re-review of early TANF studies found initial positive employment impacts from programs that emphasized immediate employment — impacts used to justify a focus on immediate employment over education and training — but that these benefits faded over time.¹⁵⁷ The majority of recipients who found work took jobs in low-paying sectors such as food service and child care, where Black and Latina mothers already were overly represented. For most parents and caregivers who had earnings in their first year after leaving TANF, those earnings were too low to lift their family out of poverty.¹⁵⁸ Other researchers find that TANF has failed to substantially improve recipients' income and financial well-being, even when they find increases in employment.¹⁵⁹

The federal TANF statute's work participation rate requires states to engage a set share of recipients in specified work activities for a set number of hours each week,¹⁶⁰ but policymakers deliberately embedded incentives in the requirement for states to serve fewer families, as they get credit toward the work performance measure for the amount by which their caseloads decline.¹⁶¹ In response to these and other incentives, nearly all states adopted full-family sanctions, which cut off the whole family from assistance (including the children) when a parent didn't meet the work

¹⁵⁵ Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center, "Children in poverty by race and ethnicity in Mississippi," updated September 2020, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/44-children-in-poverty-by-race-andethnicity?loc=26&loct=2#detailed/2/26/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/10,11,9,12,1,185,13/324,323>.

¹⁵⁶ Mississippi increased its benefit for the first time in more than two decades in 2021, from \$170 to \$260 for a family of three with no other income. Its new benefit is now the fourth lowest in the country. See Ali Safawi, "Mississippi Raises TANF Benefits But More Improvements Needed, Especially in South," CBPP, May 4, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/mississippi-raises-tanf-benefits-but-more-improvements-needed-especially-in-south>.

¹⁵⁷ LaDonna Pavetti, "Work Requirements Don't Cut Poverty, Evidence Shows," CBPP, June 7, 2016, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/work-requirements-dont-cut-poverty-evidence-shows>.

¹⁵⁸ Ali Safawi and LaDonna Pavetti, "Most Parents Leaving TANF Work, But in Low-Paying, Unstable Jobs, Recent Studies Find," CBPP, November 19, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/most-parents-leaving-tanf-work-but-in-low-paying-unstable-jobs-recent>.

¹⁵⁹ Julia Shu-Huah Wang, "State TANF Time Limit and Work Sanction Stringencies and Long-Term Trajectories of Welfare Use, Labor Supply, and Income," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, October 14, 2020, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10834-020-09714-8>.

¹⁶⁰ Liz Schott and LaDonna Pavetti, "Changes in TANF Work Requirements Could Make Them More Effective in Promoting Employment," CBPP, February 26, 2013, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/changes-in-tanf-work-requirements-could-make-them-more-effective-in>.

¹⁶¹ The designer of this incentive, Robert Rector of the Heritage Institute, put it this way: "And I started saying that the real effect of a work program is to reduce the caseload — that is what you want to measure." DeParle, p. 129.

requirement, sometimes permanently. TANF families, who already have few resources, experience increased hardship and sometimes fall deeper into poverty after being cut off due to sanctions. Research consistently finds that Black and Latinx TANF recipients are likelier to be sanctioned than white people.¹⁶²

More than 2 million families have been cut off TANF due to work-related sanctions since 1997, when most states' TANF programs started.¹⁶³ In fact, states primarily meet their work participation rate requirement by serving fewer families over time, not by engaging them in work activities. Thus, while the rhetoric of “welfare reform” focused on work and social obligations, the design of the TANF block grant and its work requirements have largely led to declining caseloads, regardless of the circumstances of those not served.

States Used TANF's Flexibility To Set Behavioral Requirements and Time Limits

In giving states virtually unfettered flexibility over eligibility policies and requirements, TANF opened the floodgates for states to police or punish parents' behavior. Some policies coerce or punish certain behaviors to “fix” cash assistance recipients to be better mothers. School attendance policies (so-called “learnfare”)¹⁶⁴ and health-related policies (“shotfare”) sanction families if their child isn't regularly in school or isn't immunized; 37 states still had learnfare policies on the books in 2019, while 24 states had immunization requirements. Family cap policies deny benefit increases to families that have another child while receiving cash aid in order to discourage women's reproduction;¹⁶⁵ these policies have declined over the years but 11 states still have them. Other policies, like restrictions on what families can buy with their benefits (generally provided on an EBT card) and drug testing, presume the parents are already guilty of something and will make bad choices. With little evidence that many TANF families are using their EBT cards in these venues, EBT restrictions are a solution in search of a problem.¹⁶⁶

Similarly, state TANF policies mandating drug testing and barring persons with drug-related felony convictions from benefits are based on stereotypes.¹⁶⁷ At least 12 states have instituted

¹⁶² LaDonna Pavetti, “TANF Studies Show Work Requirement Proposals for Other Programs Would Harm Millions, Do Little to Increase Work,” CBPP, November 13, 2018, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/tanf-studies-show-work-requirement-proposals-for-other-programs>.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ “Learnfare” policies reduce benefits or cut off the family if a child is truant or misses too many days of school.

¹⁶⁵ Learnfare: Jodie Levin-Epstein, “Changes That Won't Serve the Public Welfare,” *Washington Post*, July 12, 1992. Health-related policies: Douglas J. Besharov, Kristina Tanasichuk White, and Mark B. Coggeshall, “Health-Related Welfare Rules,” University of Maryland School of Public Policy Welfare Reform Academy, November 1996, <http://www.welfareacademy.org/pubs/welfare/health.pdf>. Family cap: Roberts, pp. 211-217.

¹⁶⁶ Robert W. Glover, “What the EBT misuse data really tells us,” *Bangor Daily News*, January 8, 2014, <https://researchshows.bdnblogs.com/2014/01/08/home/what-the-ebt-misuse-data-really-tells-us/#.Us68rtJDvTo>.

¹⁶⁷ Elizabeth Lower-Basch, “TANF Policy Brief: Random Drug Testing of TANF Recipients is Costly, Ineffective and Hurts Families,” CLASP, updated October 2013, <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2017/04/520.pdf>.

suspicion-based drug testing policies¹⁶⁸ for TANF applicants and recipients.¹⁶⁹ A review of some state laws found these policies identify very few people who actually test positive¹⁷⁰ and instead, they create another hurdle for families applying for assistance. Under the 1996 law that created TANF, people who have been convicted of a drug felony are not eligible for TANF or SNAP (an extension of the “war on drugs” policies, which disproportionately affected Black and brown communities), but states can remove or modify this ban. In the early 2000s the vast majority of states had either completely denied access to people with drug felonies or granted them eligibility under certain conditions. Fortunately, states have since moved away from these bans; only seven states still have full bans in TANF.¹⁷¹

Time limits on receipt of cash aid were a central issue in the “welfare reform” debate in the mid-1990s. Federal TANF law set a 60-month time limit on federally funded cash aid but states can set shorter time limits and 22 states have done so; Arizona has the shortest time limit at 12 months. Black and other families of color are disproportionately cut off due to time limits, research shows.¹⁷²

States Have Diverted Significant TANF Funds From Cash Assistance, Supporting Work

One justification given for replacing AFDC’s matched federal-state funding structure with the TANF block grant was that as states helped families leave the program successfully, they could use their funding flexibility to invest the savings into work programs or work supports such as child care. But that is not what has happened. States have withdrawn spending from helping families meet their basic needs but have invested little of it in work activities, and after initial increases in TANF’s early years, states have not increased child care investments much either. Instead, many states have used these federal funds in a variety of areas they traditionally supported with state funds, including programs related to child abuse and neglect, pre-kindergarten, and even college scholarships.

¹⁶⁸ These policies require a reasonable basis for suspecting someone uses an illicit substance. In TANF, drug testing is usually based on the results of general screening questions and/or criteria such as past drug convictions. Courts have held that random or suspicionless drug testing is unconstitutional. See *Lebron v. Secretary of Florida Department of Children and Families*, <http://media.ca11.uscourts.gov/opinions/pub/files/201410322.pdf>.

¹⁶⁹ Darrel Thompson, “Drug Testing and Public Assistance,” CLASP, February 2019, https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2019/02/2019_drug%20testing%20and%20public%20_0.pdf.

¹⁷⁰ Bryce Covert and Josh Israel, “What 7 states discovered after spending more than \$1 million drug testing welfare recipients,” ThinkProgress, February 26, 2015, <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/what-7-states-discovered-after-spending-more-than-1-million-drug-testing-welfare-recipients-c346e0b4305d/>.

¹⁷¹ Ali Safawi, “Remaining States Should Lift Racist TANF Drug Felony Bans; Congress Should Lift It Nationwide,” CBPP, June 30, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/remaining-states-should-lift-racist-tanf-drug-felony-bans-congress-should-lift-it-nationwide>; Darrel Thompson and Ashley Burnside, “No More Double Punishments: Lifting the Ban on SNAP and TANF for People with Prior Felony Drug Convictions,” CLASP, updated January 2021, https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2021/02/2021_No%20More%20Double%20Punishments.pdf.

¹⁷² Mary Farrell *et al.*, “An Update on State Welfare Time-Limit Policies and Their Effects on Families,” The Lewin Group and MDRC for the Department of Health and Human Services, April 2008, <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/update-state-welfare-time-limit-policies-and-their-effects-families>; Dana DeMaster, “At the Limit: December 2006 Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) Cases that Reached the 60 Month Time Limit,” Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2008, <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Legacy/DHS-5092B-ENG>; Liz Olson, “Punitive WorkFirst policies disproportionately harm families of color,” Washington State Budget and Policy Center, February 21, 2019, <https://budgetandpolicy.org/schmudget/punitive-workfirst-policies-disproportionately-harm-families-of-color/>.

Moreover, unlike spending on cash assistance, spending in these other areas is often not targeted to families with the lowest incomes.

This flexibility gives states another incentive to institute punitive policies that keep benefits low, cut families off, or make it harder to get on the program in first place, since when fewer families claim monthly cash aid, states can use the savings to fund other priorities or to fill in budget holes. In 2019 states spent just \$6.5 billion (21 percent) of their federal and state TANF funds on basic assistance, which include monthly cash aid for families, down from \$14 billion (71 percent) in 1997. That amounts to a 71 percent decline, after adjusting for inflation. States' withdrawal of funding from cash assistance has harshly affected Black families. States with larger shares of Black residents tend to spend smaller shares of their TANF funds on basic assistance.¹⁷³

Centering Needs of Black Mothers and Children in TANF Would Benefit All Families With Children

This nation's history of exclusion, marginalization, and social and economic control of Black single mothers and their children has prevented cash assistance from serving as an effective anti-poverty program and continues to do so. When adults lose a job or experience some other crisis, they have only limited access to cash assistance. All children, but especially Black and brown children, need a strong set of antiracist economic supports for their long-term well-being. TANF has a role to play, but it must be reimaged.

Racial discrimination in employment, housing, education, and social programs has contributed to higher rates of poverty and insecurity among Black families and other families of color. Racism and low, unstable income contribute to toxic stress (the excessive or prolonged activation of the body's "fight or flight" response) in children, research now shows.¹⁷⁴ Stress from racist experiences is associated with increased inflammation, which can lead to chronic disease.¹⁷⁵ Black and other parents of color constantly worrying about their ability to pay the rent or afford food cannot effectively buffer children from stresses caused by racism or deprivation; this persistent adversity can overload children's bodies and minds, with negative long-term consequences for their health, education, and employment.¹⁷⁶

Robust anti-poverty programs that boost income can promote stability, relieving parents' stress and improving children's academic, health, and economic outcomes, a National Academies of

¹⁷³ Zachary Parolin, "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and the Black-White child poverty gap in the United States," *Socio-Economic Review*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwz025>; Safawi and Floyd.

¹⁷⁴ Center on the Developing Child, "Moving Upstream: Confronting Racism to Open Up Children's Potential," Harvard University, 2021, https://46y5ch11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/HCDC_RacismBrief_FINAL3.pdf.

¹⁷⁵ "Racism has a toxic effect," ScienceDaily, May 31, 2019, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/05/190531100558.htm>

¹⁷⁶ Center on the Developing Child, "Connecting the Brain to the Rest of the Body," Harvard University, <https://46y5ch11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/InBrief-Connecting-the-Brain-to-the-Rest-of-the-Body.pdf>.

Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report on reducing childhood poverty finds.¹⁷⁷ But those programs must be antiracist and ensure equitable access and supports for all families.

Other anti-poverty programs, like SNAP and refundable tax credits, have grown significantly and have had a tremendous impact on reducing hardship, especially for Black and Latinx families and individuals.¹⁷⁸ Yet families with little or no cash income still need monthly cash assistance to be more economically secure. They have needs that may vary month to month — diapers, period products, personal hygiene and cleaning supplies, and utilities, for example — and that only cash can cover. Providing adequate, unconditional cash assistance also affirms the dignity of parents and caregivers and presumes they know how to best care for their children.

A reimagined TANF program also could complement a permanent extension of the American Rescue Plan’s temporary Child Tax Credit expansion.¹⁷⁹ An expanded Child Tax Credit would give households with low or moderate incomes additional resources to cover the expenses associated with child-rearing. But when a family falls on hard times, they need additional cash assistance from TANF to prevent a downward spiral that can result in eviction and homelessness among other negative outcomes. Together, an expanded Child Tax Credit and TANF could provide meaningful cash resources for families to cover their monthly essentials and maintain economic stability when their other income drops or is very low.

In short, cash assistance for when families experience a crisis needs to be a critical component of our economic support system. However, TANF, with its history of anti-Black racism, must be fundamentally reformed by adopting a Black Women’s Best framework. Black mothers need a cash program that provides stability through life’s challenges, protects their children from hardship, and affirms and supports parents’ autonomy over their families and careers. When this is available to Black mothers, it will mean that we have crafted a TANF program that works well for all families facing significant economic distress.

This work cannot be left entirely to the states; federal changes are essential to advance racial equity nationally and ensure a stable economic foundation for all families.

For a reimagined TANF program, we envision:

- **Establishing a federal minimum benefit so that no family of any race falls below a certain income level.** TANF benefits vary greatly by state and the lowest benefits tend to be in Southern states, which have larger Black populations and deeper-seated legacies of

¹⁷⁷ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, “A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty,” 2019, <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25246/a-roadmap-to-reducing-child-poverty>.

¹⁷⁸ Trisi and Saenz, “Deep Poverty Among Children Rose in TANF’s First Decade, Then Fell as Other Programs Strengthened;” Danilo Trisi and Matt Saenz, “Economic Security Programs Reduce Overall Poverty, Racial and Ethnic Inequities,” CBPP, January 28, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/economic-security-programs-reduce-overall-poverty-racial-and-ethnic>.

¹⁷⁹ The temporary expansion in the 2021 American Rescue Plan increased the Child Tax Credit from \$2,000 to \$3,600 per child for those younger than 6 and to \$3,000 per child for older children. It also made the full Child Tax Credit available to all children except those in families with the highest incomes (sometimes called making the credit “fully refundable”). Some policymakers have proposed making this expansion permanent.

enslavement and Jim Crow. A minimum federal benefit would establish a necessary floor to mitigate these disparities and better protect Black, brown, and white families.

- **Barring states' mandatory work requirements.** Conditioning benefits on participation in mandatory work programs is one of TANF's most racially driven policies, one that started with enslavement and continued with coerced labor practices that continued long beyond emancipation. Federal policymakers should eliminate federal requirements that states impose sanctions and mandate participation in work activities. To ensure that states don't maintain these policies even without a federal requirement, federal policymakers also should bar states from imposing mandating work as a condition of eligibility for cash assistance and imposing sanctions for non-participation.
- **Barring behavioral requirements, time limits, other eligibility exclusions.** Rooted in racism and sexism, these provisions demean families by assuming that adults are irresponsible and do not want what is best for their families. Worse, they often take away assistance from families that need it. Some also disproportionately hurt Black women and Black families. Eliminating them would remove the concept of "deservingness" from a program that should be designed to support parents and protect children from destitution.
- **Refocusing TANF agencies on helping families address immediate crises and improving long-term well-being.** TANF is better suited than other economic security programs to provide the support that parents need to achieve the goals they set for themselves and their families. (For example, tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit or the Child Tax Credit cannot provide services to families.) Yet it must do a much better job of helping families in crisis address their immediate needs and setting them up for long-term stability. The program should move away from mandatory work programs that do very little to help mothers find work that lift them and their children out of poverty and toward voluntary support programs that align with a family's goals and needs. Resources that TANF agencies previously used to monitor compliance with mandatory work requirements could instead support families in new and meaningful ways.
- **Changing TANF's funding structure to retarget TANF resources to basic assistance, address funding inequities, and prevent erosion over time.** States have used TANF resources to pay for other things beside cash aid to families; notably, states with high Black populations tend to spend less on basic assistance and to redirect these funds elsewhere. Federal policymakers based the original TANF block grant allocation on states' AFDC spending amounts; this approach locked in some of the lowest TANF funding levels per poor child, for states where Black children disproportionately live.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, the original block grant formula has lost about 40 percent of its value since its creation due to inflation, which makes it harder for states that want to adequately invest in families to do so. Federal policymakers should require states to spend a greater share of TANF resources on basic assistance, establish an equitable formula allocation, and increase the TANF block grant and index it to inflation to encourage states, especially

¹⁸⁰ Some 23 percent of Black children in the United States live in the six states with the lowest per-poor-child TANF block grant amounts as compared to 14 percent of the nation's white children. See Ife Floyd, "Cash Assistance Should Reach Millions More Families," CBPP, updated March 4, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/6-16-15tanf.pdf> and Ife Floyd, LaDonna Pavetti, and Liz Schott, "Lessons from TANF: Initial Unequal State Block-Grant Funding Formula Grew More Unequal Over Time," CBPP, revised July 20, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/7-13-17tanf.pdf>.

those with lower benefits and higher Black populations, to increase benefits and serve more families.

Remaking cash assistance requires undoing the consequences — and power — of racist ideas and policies that have marginalized mothers and their families, Black people especially. A cash aid program that centers equity for Black women would, as the “Black Women Best” framework posits, promote the economic security of all families with the least income.

Appendix 1

APPENDIX TABLE 1

Race of Mother in Families Receiving Mothers' Pensions on June 30, 1931

	Total for which race of mother was reported	White	Black	Percent Black	Other*	Black Families in areas reporting (1930 Census)
Alabama	No program in 1931					
Alaska	No program in 1931					
Arizona	Mothers' race not reported					
Arkansas	56	55	1	2%		5,917
California	2,620	2,414	52	2%	154	7,753
Colorado	650	638	7	1%	5	3,353
Connecticut	959	916	43	4%		7,174
Delaware	314	286	27	9%	1	7,682
District of Columbia	161	87	74	46%		29,995
Florida	2,006	1,976	30	1%		73,069
Georgia	No program in 1931					
Hawai'i	No program in 1931					
Idaho	Mothers' race not reported					
Illinois	1,497	1,445	51	3%	1	4,724
Indiana	1,083	1,074	9	1%		27,368
Iowa	2,304	2,222	47	2%	35	3,704
Kansas**	348	301	44	13%	3	3,807
Kentucky	117	92	25	21%		14,622
Louisiana	69	69		0%		27,767
Maine	608	607	1	0%		259
Maryland	93	78	15	16%		38,614

APPENDIX TABLE 1

Race of Mother in Families Receiving Mothers' Pensions on June 30, 1931

	Total for which race of mother was reported	White	Black	Percent Black	Other*	Black Families in areas reporting (1930 Census)
Massachusetts	Mothers' race not reported					
Michigan	2,962	2,877	71	2%	14	3,247
Minnesota	3,485	3,456	16	0%	13	2,592
Mississippi	34	34		0%		8,720
Missouri	173	159	14	8%		12,769
Montana***	319	302	4	1%	13	447
Nebraska	948	945	3	0%		560
Nevada	167	165		0%	2	164
New Hampshire**	117	175		0%	117	-
New Jersey	Mothers' race not reported					
New Mexico	No program in 1931					
New York	3,734	3,657	66	2%	11	17,809
North Carolina	429	425	4	1%		169,976
North Dakota	765	763		0%	2	84
Ohio	7,251	6,806	361	5%	84	73,954
Oklahoma	1,203	1,096	91	8%	16	16,882
Oregon	574	571	1	0%	2	139
Pennsylvania	6,066	5,700	366	6%		98,942
Rhode Island	388	384	4	1%		2,542
South Carolina	No program in 1931					
South Dakota	1,135	1,132	2	0%	1	120
Tennessee	194	191	3	2%		46,778
Texas**	208	207	1	0%		29,457
Utah	628	626	1	0%	1	311
Vermont	90	90		0%		135
Virginia	Mothers' race not reported					

Race of Mother in Families Receiving Mothers' Pensions on June 30, 1931

	Total for which race of mother was reported	White	Black	Percent Black	Other*	Black Families in areas reporting (1930 Census)
Washington	1,904	1,883	13	1%	8	1,750
West Virginia	285	276	9	3%		5,264
Wisconsin	Mothers' race not reported					
Wyoming	95	95		0%		124
Total data available	46,214	44,275	1,456	3%	483	748,574

*Includes undefined races that are not white or Black.

**Original data from source included a calculation error. Adjusted state total number of families where race was reported based on sum of families from all race groups.

***Original data included a typo; CBPP amended based on population assumptions in the state in 1930.

Source: Based off of data in U.S. Children's Bureau study of Mother's Pension programs in 1931, found in Nadasen et al. 2009

APPENDIX TABLE 2

Families Served by Mothers' Pension Programs in the Deep South, 1931

	Number of White Families	Number of Black Families
Arkansas	55	1
Florida	1,976	30
Louisiana	69	-
Mississippi	34	-
North Carolina	425	4
Tennessee	191	3
Texas	207	1
Total	2,957	39

Note: Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina had no state or local mothers' pension programs in 1931.

Source: US Children's Bureau, 1933

APPENDIX TABLE 3

State TANF-to-Poverty Ratios Over Time

	1995-96	2005-06	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	Ratio Change '05-06 to '18-19
Alabama	132	32	12	11	10	9	8	8	-9
Alaska	42	27	29	30	27	20	20	22	-11
Arizona	33	11	8	7	6	6	6	6	-21
Arkansas	101	66	6	5	5	5	5	4	-7
California	66	18	65	65	66	65	68	70	4
Colorado	82	48	20	20	26	34	34	23	6
Connecticut	99	45	31	30	23	21	22	27	-21
Delaware	55	20	33	39	38	36	39	44	-1
Florida	82	16	12	11	12	13	12	13	-7
Georgia	108	71	6	5	5	6	5	5	-11
Hawai'i	32	8	50	40	38	38	34	35	-36
Idaho	87	17	7	7	7	8	8	9	1
Illinois	61	35	17	18	17	14	15	14	-3
Indiana	64	40	8	7	7	7	6	5	-30
Iowa	52	32	27	27	22	21	21	19	-21
Kansas	55	29	13	10	10	8	8	10	-22
Kentucky	48	10	19	19	20	24	21	21	-8
Louisiana	91	52	4	4	4	4	4	4	-6
Maine	97	32	30	24	22	19	18	19	-32

APPENDIX TABLE 3

State TANF-to-Poverty Ratios Over Time

	1995- 96	2005- 06	2013- 14	2014- 15	2015- 16	2016- 17	2017- 18	2018- 19	Ratio Change '05-06 to '18-19
Maryland	81	46	29	27	30	39	33	25	-7
Massachusetts	88	40	38	34	38	38	34	40	-6
Michigan	93	51	18	16	14	12	11	11	-29
Minnesota	39	14	40	49	57	47	41	47	-4
Mississippi	118	38	10	8	7	6	6	4	-10
Missouri	41	21	28	29	19	14	13	11	-27
Montana	54	52	17	16	17	26	33	25	4
Nebraska	71	20	19	17	20	21	18	17	-35
Nevada	132	32	16	18	22	22	19	20	0
New Hampshire	100	62	24	25	25	28	30	46	-16
New Jersey	108	42	23	20	20	19	15	16	-26
New Mexico	44	32	22	22	22	21	21	24	-8
New York	79	41	39	40	43	42	42	42	1
North Carolina	74	14	7	7	7	7	6	7	-8
North Dakota	48	23	13	10	8	9	10	13	-10
Ohio	89	33	26	22	22	24	25	25	-8
Oklahoma	41	12	7	7	8	9	9	10	-2
Oregon	50	26	47	43	37	35	40	48	22
Pennsylvania	87	45	31	29	30	28	25	26	-19
Rhode Island	113	64	30	34	35	29	35	35	-29
South Carolina	40	21	12	11	11	10	10	10	-11
South Dakota	42	22	19	17	17	20	23	20	-2
Tennessee	67	51	25	25	23	23	22	18	-33
Texas	47	12	5	4	4	4	4	4	-8
Utah	59	21	9	9	9	9	10	11	-9
Vermont	80	79	78	54	47	55	50	49	-30
Virginia	56	31	25	23	19	18	16	15	-16
Washington	76	63	33	27	25	26	29	34	-29
West Virginia	68	27	18	17	16	17	16	18	-9
Wisconsin	81	23	26	24	20	20	23	23	0
Wyoming	45	3	5	5	5	6	6	7	4

Source: CBPP analysis of poverty data from the Current Population Survey and AFDC/TANF caseload data from Department of Health and Human Services and (since September 2006) caseload data collected by CBPP from state agencies

Appendix 2

Racist Narratives of Black Women

Since Black women were first enslaved in the United States, harmful narratives about them have been used to label Black mothers as unfit and to obscure the larger economic and social sources of discrimination and inequality by focusing on individual morality — essentially blaming Black families for their own exploitation.¹⁸¹ These stereotypes stem from the need to justify racist social policies such as punitive restrictions in cash assistance programs.¹⁸² Even though they fly in the face of data and rational argument, they remain widely held and still influence discussions on social welfare policy.¹⁸³

As Dorothy Roberts outlines in *Killing the Black Body*, racist narratives of Black mothers have taken various forms throughout our country's history:¹⁸⁴

The Jezebel and the immoral black mother. This stereotype, which stems from the sexualized image of slave women, was used to justify the sexual abuse of Black women by white men by painting them as sexually promiscuous and immoral. It was perpetuated by post-slavery laws and practices based on the assumption that without the moral guidance of white masters, Black women would regress to their “natural” promiscuous state and set an immoral example as mothers, causing future Black criminality.¹⁸⁵

Myths of Black women's hyperfertility and promiscuity have been used to justify government regulation of reproduction. Present-day discussions on welfare and reproductive justice are still hampered by a fear of Black fertility and motherhood.¹⁸⁶

The mammy and negligent black mother. The stereotype of the “ideal” Black woman was the asexual and maternal mammy. Her role as a mother figure, devoted to the master's children with no regard for her own, painted the picture of Black mothers as incapable of motherhood without constant supervision from white people. Freed Black women, without the influence of morally superior white women, were portrayed as having uncontrollable animalistic impulses as mothers.¹⁸⁷ Black mothers who worked for pay, many in the homes of white families, were described as proving their negligence by working late and leaving their children alone.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸¹ Premilla Nadasen, “From Widow to ‘Welfare Queen’”: Welfare and the Politics of Race. *Black Women, Gender, and Families*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2007, pp. 52–77.

¹⁸² N. Tatiana Masters, Taryn P. Lindhorst, and Marcia K. Meyers, “Jezebel at the Welfare Office: How Racialized Stereotypes of Poor Women's Reproductive Decisions and Relationships Shape Policy Implementation,” *Journal of Poverty*, Vol. 18, No. 2, April 2014, pp. 109–129.

¹⁸³ Bridgette Baldwin, “Stratification of the Welfare Poor: Intersections of Gender, Race, and ‘Worthiness’ in Poverty Discourse and Policy,” *Modern American*, Vol. 4, Spring 2010.

¹⁸⁴ Roberts.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Masters, Lindhorst, and Meyers.

¹⁸⁷ Roberts.

¹⁸⁸ Baldwin.

The matriarch and the Black unwed mother. This stereotype presents the Black matriarch as domineering, demoralizing to Black men, and responsible for transmitting a pathological lifestyle to their children. The independence of Black women was mythologized as the root of all social issues Black families faced¹⁸⁹ — the cause of disintegration of the Black family structure and the failure of Black people to “achieve success” in the United States.¹⁹⁰ In the 1960s, social scientists reinforced this idea of single Black motherhood as the cause of social problems; while white single motherhood was stigmatized on an individual level, Black single mothers were not just shamed but blamed for the “ills” of an entire race.¹⁹¹

The welfare queen and the devious Black mother. The latest caricature of the Black mother, the welfare queen is more conniving than previous images of immoral, neglectful, and domineering Black mothers in that she does not just procreate with abandon but does so to steal money from taxpayers in the form of public benefits. This notion of the welfare queen and her children as a parasitic burden on the government has been used to justify policies that monitor and restrict the actions of Black mothers.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Roberts.

¹⁹⁰ Nadasen, 2007.

¹⁹¹ Roberts.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*