

# Foreword

Over the course of the years leading up to the completion of this research project, I had the opportunity to talk about the topic of this dissertation with people from all walks of life. Some of my interlocutors were expert on the subject, some others were completely new to it; in other words, they did not know how widespread poverty is in the United States and how severely it impacts the lives of single female parents and their families.

Regardless of how much people knew about women and poverty in the United States, there was one question that I have been asked many times over. “Why is it that the federal government does not consider and address poverty – its root causes and the factors contributing to its perpetuation – the way it is considered and addressed in your research work?” There is no simple answer to this very legitimate question but it is my personal belief that the reason why the government’s view of poverty is so different from the view presented in this work has everything to do both with the status that poverty and public assistance programs have had in American history and with a very peculiar “convergence of political developments”<sup>1</sup> and old prejudices that took place just before 1996 and paved the way for the signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)<sup>2</sup> into law.

Public assistance programs originated in the United States as tax-supported, discretionary residential institutions to help the “worthy poor” around the mid-1820’s. During that time, fervent popular beliefs suggested that able-bodied individuals who were unemployed and needy suffered from major “character defects.”<sup>3</sup> Those same defects were believed to be respon-

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<sup>1</sup>M. Wiseman, “Welfare Reform in the United States: A Background Paper,” *Housing Policy Debate* 7 (4) (1996): 595-648, 595.

<sup>2</sup>*Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act*, Public Law 104-193, 104th Cong., 2d sess. (22 August 1996), secs. 101-913.

<sup>3</sup>*History of the 19th Century American Poorhouses*, 3.  
Available at <http://www.poorhousestory.com/history.htm>

sible for the individuals' own indigence and therefore, for their "unworthiness."<sup>4</sup> In contrast, individuals who suffered from a physical disability, such as blindness and deafness or individuals who were mentally challenged were considered by society unlucky but morally sound, and therefore "worthy." In the 1820's, society looked at county poorhouses as a way to restore normality in dysfunctional individuals.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it was believed that only by housing "unworthy" paupers in residential institutions could one hope to free them from those objectionable habits that were at fault for their condition.<sup>6</sup>

As shown in detail in Chapter 1 of this manuscript, the dichotomy between "worthy" and "unworthy" or "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, first formulated in the mid-19th Century, has continued to influence the design and implementation of social welfare policies up to the present day. For example, Mothers' Pensions statutes of the early 1920's allowed counties to establish non-demeaning grants to support the children of "worthy" white women, i.e. white women who were widowed, divorced, or had been deserted by their husbands, and passed strict moral standard tests. Statistics show that only very few black women were recipients of Mothers' Pensions. For example in 1931, 96 percent of the 46,597 families served by Mothers' Pensions and reporting race were white, and of the four percent who were black, about half lived in only two states, Ohio and Pennsylvania.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, after 1929, the federal government started to allocate money to fund the provision of cash relief to all white, needy, and "worthy" males, i.e white male voters who had become unemployed as a result of the Great Depression. Later, with the passage of the Social Security Act (SSA)<sup>8</sup> in 1935, white widows of previously employed males and their children became the recipients of the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC).<sup>9</sup> In contrast, "unworthy" women and children belonging to "subordinated" races and classes were excluded from receiving public assistance benefits under the ADC program.

Discriminatory attitudes towards single women who did not pass moral

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<sup>4</sup>See, *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>See, M. Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women. Social Welfare Policies from Colonial Times to the Present*, rev. ed., (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 201.

<sup>8</sup>*Social Security Act of 1935, U.S. Codes*, vol. 42, secs. 301-1397jj.

<sup>9</sup>Aid to Dependent Children or ADC was Title IV of the Social Security Act of 1935 and offered cash relief to poor, single female parents and their dependent children. In its original version, the main function of this public assistance program was to provide federal matching funds to states interested in continuing to implement Mothers' Pensions statutes at the local level. The program was designed by Grace Abbott and Katherine Lenroot, who at time were the previous and current directors of the United States Children's Bureau.

standards tests and towards women of color persisted into the 1960's and early 1970's when the number of African American mothers and children on welfare increased dramatically. The 1980's were no exception to the rule and saw a return "to the exclusion of undeserving poor,"<sup>10</sup> redefined by then as people whose behavior did not conform with majoritarian, middle-class values.<sup>11</sup> In the 1980's, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC),<sup>12</sup> the new public assistance program that substituted the previous ADC drew heavy criticism. Memorable anecdotes of "welfare queens driving welfare cadillacs"<sup>13</sup> started to circulate. It was President Reagan who conjured up this particular anecdote during a speech that he gave in the 1980's.<sup>14</sup> In the speech the President recounted the story of a Chicago welfare recipient who had grown rich at the expenses of honest taxpayers. Allegedly, the woman in question had "us[ed] 80 aliases, 30 addresses, a dozen social security cards and four fictional dead husbands [to] rip[ ] off \$150,000 from the government."<sup>15</sup> The country was outraged. Little mattered that the media searched in vain for this mythical welfare criminal in the hopes of interviewing her and found out that she did not even exist.<sup>16</sup>

Building on the general mood of the public, conservative politicians started arguing that AFDC had been breeding generations of lazy citizens with low moral standards, a poor work ethic, and the sole ambition of avoiding employment.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, between 1987 and 1992, conservative ideas on welfare and its effects translated into a series of punitive welfare state demonstration projects, such as Learnfare – a program implemented in Wisconsin in 1987 and conditioning eligibility to AFDC benefits upon dependent children's school attendance<sup>18</sup> – Child Exclusion – a project implemented

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<sup>10</sup>L. A. Williams, *The Ideology of Division: Behavior Modification Welfare Reform Proposals*, 102 Yale L. J. 719 (1992), 725.

<sup>11</sup>See, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>For a more detailed analysis of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) see, *infra*, Sec. 1.1.1, 21.

<sup>13</sup>*Myth: There Are Welfare Queens Driving Welfare Cadillacs*, 1. Available at <http://www.huppi.com/Kangaroo/L-welfarequeen.htm>

<sup>14</sup>N. Tobin, *Disrobing the Welfare Queen*, 1. Available at <http://www.wiretapmag.org/stories/9435>

<sup>15</sup>*Myth: There Are Welfare Queens Driving Welfare Cadillacs*, 1.

<sup>16</sup>See, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>See, M. B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), quoted in *Welfare Reform*, 1. Available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare\\_Reform](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare_Reform)

<sup>18</sup>See, Williams, *The Ideology of Division: Behavior Modification Welfare Reform Proposals*, 727. Under the Wisconsin Learnfare program a child on AFDC who missed ten, unexcused days of school in a semester was subject to monitoring. In case a child missed

in 1992 in New Jersey and denying cash benefits to any additional child born into a AFDC family<sup>19</sup> – and Bridefare or Wedfare – a project combining a child exclusion policy with small financial incentives to welfare-reliant mothers who opted for marriage.<sup>20</sup>

In the months leading up to the passage of the Clinton Welfare Reform, the idea that AFDC bred generations of dysfunctional individuals surfaced again. For example, in 1994, proponents of the Reform, such as Newt Gingrich and the House Republicans, argued that only by reducing or withholding cash relief could the government hope to transform dysfunctional mothers into respectable, productive members of society, thereby solving the problem of widespread poverty.<sup>21</sup>

As 58th United States Speaker of the House, Gingrich was considered by many “the public face”<sup>22</sup> of the Republican opposition to President Clinton.<sup>23</sup> During the 1994 campaign season, in an attempt to reunite the Republican Party, Gingrich introduced to the members of the House U. S. State Representative Richard Armey and his *Contract with America*.<sup>24</sup> As a list of campaign promises the *Contract with America* outlined the possibility of “bring[ing] to the House a new [Republican] majority that [would] transform the way Congress works[,]”<sup>25</sup> while also promising to bring to the floor of the House “within the first 100 days of the 104th Congress”<sup>26</sup> a total of 10 innovative bills. Bill number three on the list was titled Personal Responsibility Act and it was aimed at reducing the incidence of out-of-wedlock births and teenage pregnancy by denying AFDC benefits to adolescent mothers and to any additional child born to an adult mother while on welfare. Also, bill number three also promised to cut total spending for public assistance programs, and to enact a “tough two-years-and-out provision[,]”<sup>27</sup> and mandatory welfare-to-work requirements and to promote responsibility

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two additional, unexcused full days of school in any of the following months she became subject to sanctioning. Sanctions consisted in a reduction of the child’s family grant by the entire amount designated for that particular dependent child. For a more in-depth analysis of the Wisconsin Learnfare program see, Williams, *The Ideology of Division*, 726-32.

<sup>19</sup>See, Williams, *The Ideology of Division*, 727.

<sup>20</sup>See, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>See, *ibid.*, 720.

<sup>22</sup>*Newt Gingrich*. Available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newt\\_Gingrich](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newt_Gingrich)

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*Republican Contract with America*.

Available at <http://www.house.gov/house/contract/CONTRACT.htm>

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

among AFDC recipients.<sup>28</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the tide of public opinion in favor of drastic changes to the existing welfare system was considerable and the pressure for President Clinton to sign those changes into law was on.<sup>29</sup> In his 1996 State of the Union address, President Clinton promised America “to end welfare as we know it.”<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, after vetoing two bills that the Republican-controlled Congress had introduced between January and summer of 1996, including the welfare reform bill outlined in the *Contract with America*, on August 22, 1996 President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, also known as PRWORA.<sup>31</sup>

This piece of legislation was hammered out in a compromise with the Republican majority, and right from its inception it became one of the most controversial issues for President Clinton within his own party.<sup>32</sup> Democratic legislators strongly criticized the President’s passage of PRWORA, which in its official version bears a heavy resemblance to the two welfare-related bills that President Clinton had previously struck down.<sup>33</sup> For example, critics argued that the five-year time limit imposed by PRWORA on the receipt of welfare was too harsh and that people who would exceed the time limit because of circumstances outside their control could potentially turn to crime in order to afford a living.<sup>34</sup> Also, critics felt that not enough money was being allocated by PRWORA to vocational training and that states may prove unable to administer their TANF block grants efficiently.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Democrats claimed that although the bill had the potential of moving recipients out of the rolls and into the labor market in a booming economy, the effects of PRWORA may turn from positive to harmful in case of a recession.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>See, *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>See, *Welfare Reform*. Available [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare\\_reform](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare_reform)

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>See, *ibid.* *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act*, Public Law 104-193, 104th Cong., 2d. sess. (22 August 1996), secs. 101-913.

<sup>32</sup>See, *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>See, *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

