

WELFARE WARRIORS

The Welfare Rights Movement
in the United States

PREMILLA NADASEN



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Abbreviations

ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
ACORN	Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now
ADC	Aid to Dependent Children
AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
AFDC-UP	Aid to Families with Dependent Children for Unemployed Parents
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations
ANC	Aid to Needy Children
BPP	Black Panther Party
B-WAC	Brooklyn Welfare Action Council
BWRO	Baltimore Welfare Rights Organization
CAA	Community Action Agency
CAP	Community Action Program
CARASA	Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse
Citywide	Citywide Coordinating Committee of Welfare Rights Groups
COINTELPRO	Counter-Intelligence Program
COLA	Cost of Living Adjustments
COMBAT	Community Organization Members Build Absolute Teamwork
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
CUFAW	Citizens United for Adequate Welfare
DWAC	Downtown Welfare Advocate Center
EKWRO	East Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization
EOA	Economic Opportunity Act
ERAP	Economic Research and Action Project
FAP	Family Assistance Plan

FDR	Franklin Delano Roosevelt
GROWL	Grass-Roots Organizing for Welfare Leadership
HEW	Department of Health, Education and Welfare
ICPP	Inner-City Protestant Parish
IFCO	Inter-religious Foundation for Community Organizations
JOIN	Jobs or Income Now
KOCO	Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization
MAW	Mothers for Adequate Welfare
MEJ	Movement for Economic Justice
MFY	Mobilization for Youth
MWRO	Massachusetts Welfare Rights Organization
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NASW	National Association of Social Workers
NCC	National Coordinating Committee
NCSC	National Council of Senior Citizens
NOW	National Organization for Women
NUL	National Urban League
NWRO	National Welfare Rights Organization
NWRU	National Welfare Rights Union
OAA	Old Age Assistance
OAI	Old Age Insurance
OEO	Office of Economic Opportunity
OSCAW	Ohio Steering Committee for Adequate Welfare
PAPAW	Pittsfield Association of Parents for Adequate Welfare
POWER	People Organized to Win Employment Rights
PPB	People's Poverty Board
P/RAC	Poverty/Rights Action Center
PWRO	Pennsylvania Welfare Rights Organization
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SRS	Social and Rehabilitative Services
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
VWRO	Virginia Welfare Rights Organization
WIC	Women, Infant, and Children Program
WIN	Work Incentive Program
WRDA	Welfare Recipients Demand Action
WRO	Welfare Rights Organization
WSO	Wage Supplement Organization

Introduction

Welfare is one of the most contentious political issues in the United States today.¹ The debates about welfare are informed by competing views and values on some fundamental issues including: the work ethic, faith in the market economy, compassion for the less fortunate, models of motherhood, mores about sexuality and reproductive rights, and convictions about where our taxes ought to go. These rhetorical welfare wars are steeped in the ongoing politics of race, class, and gender, and give symbolic, as well as social meaning to these categories by casting the typical welfare recipient as a poor black woman. The merits and drawbacks of public assistance are discussed among academics, policy makers, and journalists; in pool halls and coffee shops. People with their own research teams and reams of data about welfare, as well as people who have never met a welfare recipient but suspect that the lady across the street with six kids must be on welfare, all have opinions about public assistance. Conspicuously muted in the public debate are the voices of welfare recipients. Muted is not to say, silent. Since the 1960s, welfare recipients have asserted—in various ways, with varying degrees of success—their right to speak to the issues that impact their lives. The problem that remains is the reluctance of those in power to pay attention.

Welfare came about with the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. With that act, the federal government initiated what later became Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to provide matching funds to states to support poor women with dependent children. Since then, dominant public opinion and policy makers' rhetoric unfolded in such a way as to demonize and silence welfare recipients. In the words of historian Michael Katz, most Americans see welfare recipients as “the undeserving poor.”² Their needs, desires, concerns, and day-to-day lives are so far

removed from the popular debates that when researchers reveal accurate statistics about women on welfare and their employment or fertility rates, many people refuse to believe them. The stereotypes and snap-shot images of the lazy, undisciplined, promiscuous recipient so dominate the discourse about welfare that few people see the reality for what it is. Even fewer consider that welfare recipients might have opinions that matter, or that they ought to have a say in the making of social policy. Simply put, poor people are more palatable to others when they seem to accept their lot without complaint.

There have been periods of successful protest on the part of poor people in this country. The welfare rights movement captured the national spotlight in the mid-1960s as a powerful movement of poor black women on welfare asserting their political and economic rights, shaping welfare policy, and demanding and winning a space at the table, at least temporarily. In the span of a few short years, the movement changed the face of social policy, established legal protections for welfare recipients, and helped shift the political dialogue about government responsibility and economic justice. Although the welfare rights movement did not, in fact, achieve many of its primary goals, its victories are, nevertheless, astonishing given the obstacles it encountered, the resources it lacked, and the internal tensions in the movement that had to be negotiated.

The welfare rights movement at its peak had an estimated following of somewhere between 30,000 and 100,000. These are the same estimates given for followers of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at its height, yet SDS has been the subject of countless books, articles, films, and memoirs. In contrast, the welfare rights movement is one of the most understudied sociopolitical movements of the postwar period. With a few exceptions, most notably Guida West's *The National Welfare Rights Movement* and Frances Fox Piven's and Richard Cloward's chapter in *Poor People's Movements*, the struggle for welfare rights in the 1960s has received little attention. In recent years, some historians have begun to write about the movement, paying particular attention to gender and what the activism of this group of poor women can tell us about motherhood, citizenship, and legal reform.³ Overall, however, compared to other struggles of the 1960s, the welfare rights movement has been essentially glossed over.

Despite this lack of scholarly attention, it is clear that the welfare rights movement was perhaps one of the most important political and social struggles of the 1960s. Its significance goes far beyond the number of members it counted or the following it amassed. The movement emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s when women on AFDC came together in their

local communities to discuss problems with their caseworkers, to try to understand welfare department policy, and to figure out how to make ends meet on a meager monthly budget. They soon formed local groups—sometimes by themselves, sometimes with the help of churches, social services agencies, or civil rights organizations. These local groups initiated the process of reforming the welfare system to meet the needs of its recipients more adequately. In 1967, with the help of middle-class supporters, a number of welfare rights activists from around the country formed a national organization to coordinate the actions of local welfare rights groups. The National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) was formally under the control of elected welfare recipient leaders, most of whom were African American women. But in practice, the mostly white, male middle-class staff, through control of finances and the bureaucratic machine of the national office, also strongly influenced the politics and goals of the welfare rights movement during its formative years. The ensuing struggle for power between recipients and staff over organizational control, tactics, and ideology proved important, and contributed to the development of a feminist consciousness among the women recipients. In the end, black female recipients were able to make their voices heard and their power felt, but they struggled on multiple fronts to do so.

The movement carried out several campaigns. It advocated better treatment from caseworkers, sought to reform the administration of welfare, and demanded higher monthly benefits and “special grants” to bring recipients up to what the welfare department considered a decent standard of living. It organized to get credit for welfare recipients from major department stores. The movement created advisory boards, submitted recommendations to welfare officials, and sent representatives to conferences and legislative bodies to involve welfare recipients in policy making. Perhaps the most important struggle was for a guaranteed annual income, a federal income floor that would bring all Americans up to a basic minimum standard of living.

In this book, I have written in part a history of a movement. I chronicle the birth, growth, and decline of the struggle for welfare rights from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s. I examine not just NWRO but those local groups that disaffiliated because of political fallout and those that chose not to join the national organization for a complex set of reasons. I ferret out how organizers mobilized members and established goals and how those goals evolved over time. I also examine the bitter conflicts that wracked the movement at particular moments—conflicts structured by race, gender, class, and political ideology. As a movement history, this story

ends with poor women of color claiming ownership of the politics and agenda of the organization, and putting into practice their newly formulated feminist perspective—reflecting their own gender and class politics.

I tell this story primarily by focusing on the activists, both those in national leadership and those at the grassroots level. I analyze the social and political circumstances under which black feminist politics emerged and examine what feminism, racial liberation, and class politics meant to women on welfare. As such, this is as much an intellectual history as a social and political history. The political consciousness of women in the welfare rights movement was forged not from a theoretical understanding of women's place, but from a world view constructed out of their daily lives. Their reasons for coming together were complicated. Structural changes, such as economic prosperity, urban migration, and a relatively optimistic ideological climate, fed their desire to challenge their economic, political, and social marginalization. The large-scale changes in the political mood of the country and the world—demands by the downtrodden of the globe and the nation—fueled their confidence that their desires could be realized. This, in combination with the women's personal histories of activism and the day-to-day indignities they dealt with as poor black women on welfare influenced their involvement in the welfare rights movement.

During the 1960s, AFDC came to serve African Americans disproportionately. Politicians, the press, and some sectors of the public demanded cutbacks in AFDC, launched investigations of welfare fraud, and described recipients as unworthy and undeserving of assistance. Welfare recipients faced restrictive local and federal legislation, punitive welfare department policies, and overbearing caseworkers, who sought to deny them the option of being full-time mothers. They were routinely cut off welfare because caseworkers, in conjunction with department policy or federal and state directives, characterized them as employable or unfit mothers. Even though African Americans were a minority of welfare recipients, welfare increasingly came to be understood in racial terms and viewed as a program benefiting black women. Race-laden press coverage and public discussions of black migration, "illegitimacy," promiscuity, and laziness transformed the program from one supporting the right of single mothers to stay home to one encouraging work outside the home. There was now a racially defined gender script that said good white mothers should stay at home, and good black mothers must go to work. This became a measure of responsible parenting and a reversal of the standard of motherhood applied to the white predecessors of black welfare recipients.⁴ Discourse and ideology became particularly important in the politics of welfare. The language, images, and

dialogue about AFDC were part of the reality for welfare recipients and influenced such “material” things as the size of the monthly benefit check. In this way, ideology and materiality were intertwined.

As they began to organize, participants in the movement saw themselves not simply as poor people or welfare recipients, but as women, community members, members of a racial group, mothers, tenants, and consumers. This was reflected in their literature, speeches, and demands. In addition to welfare rights, many of them had dabbled or were immersed in myriad community issues such as housing, education, civil rights, urban renewal, and consumer rights. Clearly, race, class, gender, and sexuality were not separate entities shaping the activism of poor black women. Their activism is truly an example of the “multiple consciousness” that multicultural and black feminist theorists have written about in recent years.⁵

This “multiple consciousness,” of course, complicated the notion of political identity for these women. They do not fit easily into one of the standard narratives of race/class/gender of the 1960s, which demarcate struggles of that era into poor people’s, black freedom, and women’s movements. These women defined themselves in ways that were multilayered and evolving. The self-definitions, then, were not fixed, essential positions, and were elastic enough that despite the internal struggles and transformations that the movement underwent, it remained multiracial and open to both men and women. The question of identity is never only a process of self-definition, however, but always takes place within a larger political context. Individuals are not autonomous subjects and their sense of self, according to Chandra Mohanty, is constituted within multiple social relations.⁶ Reform movements—such as the women’s and black freedom movements—prompted women welfare rights activists to think of themselves differently and encouraged participants to reconfigure movement strategy to appeal to shifting political discourses. But, in addition, the mainstream American culture and dominant political discourse structured AFDC recipients as racialized and gendered subjects. Welfare rights activists contested the symbolic meaning of public assistance and black womanhood by recasting their subject identities as mothers, consumers, citizens, and feminists.

Women welfare rights activists wove together their multiple identities to create a distinct political ideology and brand of radicalism that differed from what many other people—black and white—articulated. They adopted political positions based on a material understanding of the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality and the way in which these realities were intertwined and inseparable for all people.⁷ Although I call theirs a

black feminist perspective, white, Hispanic, and Native American women also subscribed to a form of the same perspective or standpoint. But their material understanding was also a subjective view of how welfare recipients saw themselves in relation to the rest of the world and how the world saw them. The affluence surrounding them, as well as the prevalent rhetoric (of forever eradicating want and need) shaped their notions of poverty. They forged their ideas about class, not on the shop floor but in a variety of places, including government welfare offices, the supermarket, and their homes.

These women's stories show that class formation is, as Paul Gilroy puts it, a contingent process. Class is both socially and culturally constructed.⁸ Welfare recipients' experiences with household, family, and reproduction shaped their activism and the terms on which they articulated their liberation. Economic discrimination and racial and gender oppression informed their analysis and critique of the welfare system. They opposed the inadequate welfare budget, as well as close monitoring of their personal lives. They clearly benefited from and identified with the black freedom movement, which was the foundation for much of the political organizing of this era. At the same time, they articulated a version of black empowerment that differed from the widespread patriarchal discourse at the time by rejecting the male-centered solutions to poverty premised on a two-parent, male-headed family model. The welfare rights movement also went beyond the call for civil and political rights and demanded a minimum standard of living, pressuring some civil rights leaders to confront problems of poverty more directly. In this way, welfare rights activists were continually expanding and modifying the notion of "rights," and concepts of freedom and liberation. Their story complicates the trajectory of the black freedom movement of the 1960s.

In addition to its rightful place within the black freedom movement, the welfare rights movement also represented a struggle by women for their autonomy and, therefore, can and should be defined as part of the women's movement of the 1960s. Welfare rights organizers' version of feminism differed from that of many other women of the time.⁹ Many liberal and some radical white feminists in the 1960s and 1970s believed that gender was primary and should be distinct from other issues such as poverty and racism.¹⁰ Women on welfare, however, understood gender as mediated by race and class, and their notion of what constituted "women's liberation" was rooted in their experiences of racial and gender discrimination and class exploitation—having to work at low-paying, menial, and, often, dangerous employment outside the home. Thus, their version of women's liberation included the right to stay home and raise their children as well as seek employment outside the home; access to reproductive control over their

bodies (not only abortion); and the right to be involved in a relationship with a man if they wanted to and on their own terms. Clearly, then, the welfare rights movement had major importance not just because of what it achieved, but because of how its story can help us to redefine our understanding of the history of reform in the 1960s. The following chapters will show us why.

CHAPTER 1

The Origins of the Welfare Rights Movement

The Beginnings: 1966

On June 30, 1966, 35 people, mostly women and children, arrived in Columbus, Ohio, weary but jubilant, after a 10-day walk from Cleveland. Their 150-mile “Walk for Decent Welfare” drew attention to the inadequacy of welfare benefits in Ohio. When the marchers left Cleveland on June 20 they were 100 strong, and several hundred supporters joined them as they passed through towns and cities along their journey. Indicative of the racial hostility directed at the AFDC program, bystanders heckled and harassed the Ohio marchers, calling them bums and chanting “work, work, work.” One night a cross was burned nearby as they slept.¹ Upon their arrival in Columbus a crowd of 2,000 met them at East High School, where they gathered before the last leg of their march to the steps of the state capitol. The Ohio Rally for Decent Welfare sought to ensure that recipients receive 100 per cent of the amount of money the state welfare department decided was necessary for a minimum standard of living.² At the time, the state paid only 70 per cent of the estimated amount. The Ohio Steering Committee for Adequate Welfare (OSCAW), which had planned the demonstration in conjunction with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), demanded that the governor call a special session of the state legislature to increase welfare grants for the remainder of 1966 and that the budget for the following year meet the full standard of need for all welfare recipients.³

Protesters in Ohio were not alone in their efforts to reform the welfare system. On the same day that the Ohio marchers arrived in Columbus, recipients and their supporters around the country gathered at their state capitols, in public squares, and at local welfare departments to stage the first nationwide demonstration of recipients of AFDC, a program for poor single mothers and their children.⁴ In Chicago, 200 poor people marched to the city's downtown welfare office. In Newark, 75 welfare recipients went to the state capitol to demand higher welfare benefits.⁵ In New York City, 2,000 mostly black women and children demanded an end to "indignities" of the welfare system, as well as an increase in the school clothing allowance for their children.⁶ Other protests occurred in Los Angeles, Baltimore, Trenton, Louisville, Boston, Washington, and San Francisco. An estimated 6,000 people demonstrated in 25 cities across the country. Made up overwhelmingly of women receiving AFDC, the movement also included a small number of male and female recipients of Aid to the Blind, Aid to the Disabled, and General Assistance.⁷ African Americans constituted the majority of participants with involvement by some whites, Latinos, and Native Americans.

Although the 1966 welfare protests did not receive as much attention as the civil rights marches led by Martin Luther King, Jr., they, nevertheless, managed to grace the front pages of many national newspapers. The protests for economic and social justice signaled a new phase in the struggle for black equality—one addressing more resolutely the problems of poverty. As the Ohio marchers embarked on the first major "walk" for welfare, State Representative Carl Stokes, a recently unsuccessful candidate for mayor of Cleveland, spoke to the participants about the importance of the impending protest. In reference to the concurrent Meredith March in Mississippi, he counseled, "As you go down this road, you must remember that this march is more significant than the Mississippi March, because it's here and it's about our problems."⁸ According to organizer George Wiley, the welfare rights movement sought to do "what the civil rights movement did not do."⁹ Indeed, for poor people in urban centers untouched by the activities of major civil rights organizations, it seemed their time had come.

June 30, 1966, marked the official start of a nationwide mobilization for welfare rights in the United States. It was a date commemorated annually by welfare rights activists for many years. Comprised of an alliance of grassroots groups, the welfare rights movement gave a political voice to one of the most disenfranchised sectors of U.S. society and worked toward improving the living standards of all poor Americans.¹⁰ Recipients and welfare rights supporters had met a few months earlier at a conference in Chicago and made June 30 a national day of action around welfare, in solidarity

with the Ohio Walk for Adequate Welfare, which was already planned. Conference members asked George Wiley, head of the Poverty/Rights Action Center (P/RAC) in Washington, to coordinate and publicize the event. Wiley and his staff at P/RAC traveled around the country informing recipients of the upcoming march and providing technical support to local groups. In addition, Wiley arranged several meetings over the course of 1966 resulting in the founding of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), which would encompass most, but not all, of the local groups that constituted the welfare rights movement, and would lead the struggle for welfare rights over the next decade. Wiley and many of the recipients participating in the first national demonstration would come to play prominent roles in the national movement.

The welfare rights movement sought to organize poor African American women to reform AFDC and, in the process, make the program more humane. They confronted a welfare system that gave them a meager monthly allowance leaving them unsure day to day whether they could pay rent or feed and clothe their children; that showed them little respect; and that stigmatized them as lazy, licentious, and unfit mothers. Welfare rights protesters rallied and marched, picketed and protested to pressure public officials to address the inadequacies in the welfare system. They demanded that welfare officials enforce regulations guaranteeing them a basic standard of living and eradicate those violating their civil rights. They believed that welfare should be distributed in a nondiscriminatory and dignified manner to everyone who needed it. These demands were the basis of the initial welfare rights protests.

Credit for emergence of the welfare rights movement is often given to the many middle-class organizers and supporters—such as African American civil rights activist George Wiley. Wiley and other civil rights activists began to work with welfare recipients in the mid-1960s.¹¹ Many welfare recipients, however, initiated groups in the late 1950s and early 1960s in response to their own day-to-day difficulties with the welfare system, which was becoming increasingly harsh, particularly for black women. This, in conjunction with a political climate conducive to social action, encouraged them to organize on their own behalf. But despite the looming presence of welfare in their lives, these women did not understand their situation only as welfare recipients or poor people. Instead, their complicated identities emerged from their experiences with racism in the welfare system, their work as mothers, as well as their involvement in numerous community issues. Their multiple identities informed their participation in the movement and later developed into a clearer ideological position. If we take notice of these early welfare rights groups, we might conclude that even

though the national movement made its debut in 1966, the struggle for welfare rights actually began much earlier. The grievances the women harbored and an opportune moment for protest had enabled welfare recipients to come together to question the regulations and administration of welfare.

History of AFDC/ADC

The AFDC program in the mid-1960s was dehumanizing, disempowering, and inefficient. Instituted in 1935 as part of the Social Security Act, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC)—as the program was known prior to 1962—offered a small monthly allowance for children and nothing for the mother. The Social Security Act, a watershed development in public policy, had built into it certain race and gender assumptions that profoundly influenced the political fate of various components of the legislation. Full-time wage earners, most of whom were men, were assured a decent level of economic assistance through unemployment compensation and social security, both of which were social insurance programs and tied to one's past work history. Married women benefited as spouses of wage-earning men. However, part-time and unsteady workers and African Americans benefited the least. Southern and conservative congressmen limited assistance to African Americans by excluding two occupations in which they predominated: domestic and agricultural work.¹²

Part of a gendered and racialized two-track welfare system, ADC provided less generous and more restrictive assistance than social insurance. Along with Old Age Assistance and Aid to the Disabled, ADC was part of the public assistance programs serving the poor and a disproportionately larger number of women and people of color.¹³ The federal government provided oversight and matching funds for ADC, but states controlled eligibility criteria, determined budgets, and essentially ran the program. Consequently, local politics, to a large degree, shaped the program.¹⁴ ADC payments varied widely from state to state and were generally far lower than payments in federally run contributory social insurance programs such as social security and unemployment compensation.

Initially a small noncontroversial program, ADC, like its precursor mothers' pensions programs, excluded most, but not all, of the women of color who needed assistance. White women, most of whom were widows or deserted by their husbands, overwhelmingly populated the welfare rolls in the late 1930s.¹⁵ Pitied and considered worthy of support if they met the social and moral standards set by caseworkers, these women were viewed as mothers and caretakers. To deflect potential criticism, caseworkers made

assistance available only to recipients they believed were blameless for their current situation, morally pure, and properly disciplining and caring for their children. Consequently, ADC and mothers' pensions contained strict eligibility criteria to force poor single mothers to conform to white middle-class notions of proper motherhood. Mothers' pensions programs, for example, became an avenue for "Americanization" of southern and eastern European immigrant women.¹⁶ Despite these restrictive rules, the idea that single women should be supported in their work as mothers prevailed in the political discourse.¹⁷ In practice, however, most mothers worked or supplemented their monthly allowance, which was simply too little to support their children. Local welfare departments often expected recipients to work even though they saw recipients as primarily mothers.¹⁸

ADC was, nevertheless, an improvement over the Progressive Era's mothers' pensions and had the potential to be a widespread, nondiscriminatory support system for single mothers. The federal matching system encouraged states lacking mothers' pensions programs to establish ADC programs. And federal oversight and funding gave the federal government some control over how local programs developed. Under ADC the number and proportion of African American families assisted increased. In 1931, of the 93,620 families receiving mothers' aid, an estimated 3 per cent were black.¹⁹ In 1940, approximately 17 per cent of 372,000 ADC families were black.²⁰

Even though more African American women received ADC than had received mothers' pensions, patterns of discrimination in the program were widespread. A majority of African American women needing assistance didn't receive it, particularly in the South and other areas where large numbers of African Americans lived.²¹ For example, in 1943 the state of Louisiana refused assistance to women during cotton picking season, and Detroit in the 1940s frequently denied assistance to African Americans due to having an "unsuitable home."²² During the 1940s, the federal Bureau of Public Assistance and advocates in the social welfare community worked to expand benefits and extend eligibility.²³ In 1945 the Social Security Board recommended that states repeal the suitable home law. Fifteen states did so in the 1940s. In 1946 the Board also raised the maximum matching federal payment. The following year it issued guidelines that everyone should have the opportunity to apply for ADC and that the application process must be prompt and efficient. However hesitantly, in the 1940s a network of welfare reform advocates worked to curb the exclusionary policies of states and improve the stature of ADC. Simultaneously, the number of needy women claiming assistance—both African American and white—climbed steadily, and, at times, dramatically.

The Backlash

During the 1950s a welfare backlash by local politicians, the conservative press, and many ordinary white Americans exposed purported welfare fraud and “chiseling.” In local areas around the country, including Washington, D.C., Detroit, and New Jersey, special investigative committees documented and ferreted out recipients allegedly unworthy of support. In most cases, hyperbole and inflammatory rhetoric shrouded the dialogue and publicity about welfare. Journalists or investigative committees charged that women recipients had several children out of wedlock, fathers took no responsibility for raising their children, and parents simply did not want to work. In most cases, the stereotypical welfare recipient was an African American woman. Investigations into these claims, however, rarely revealed widespread fraud and found minimal abuse in the system. In Detroit, for example, a 1948 study revealed only two cases of alleged fraud and in neither case was the recipient convicted of criminal wrongdoing.²⁴ Nevertheless, the investigations aroused public suspicion about welfare and planted in the minds of many Americans an inextricable association among receipt of ADC, African Americans, immorality, and laziness.

The rhetoric and publicity encouraged legislative changes. These changes included a whole new slate of local regulations: “suitable home” laws denying aid to mothers who had children out of wedlock or engaged in other behavior case workers considered immoral or inappropriate; “substitute father” or “man-in-the-house” rules denying aid to women if there was evidence of a male present in her home; employable mother laws refusing assistance to women physically able to work; and residence laws denying assistance to migrants from outside the state.²⁵ During the 1950s, a number of cities and counties, including Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, WI, Los Angeles, CA, Cuyahoga County, OH, Wayne County, MI, and the states of Illinois, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania formed special units within the welfare department to investigate whether a substitute parent resided in the house.²⁶ Georgia passed an employable mother rule in 1952. Michigan and Florida passed suitable home laws in 1953 and 1959, respectively. In 1962, New York State passed a residence law denying benefits to migrants if it could be proven that they came to the state for the purpose of receiving welfare.²⁷ By the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of states implemented punitive welfare laws to reduce the number of people on welfare.²⁸ These laws were not new, but in the 1950s they were strengthened, formalized, and expanded.

In addition to restricting eligibility, local officials reduced welfare grants. Between December 1961 and December 1962, the average monthly ADC grant per recipient declined in 30 states. Far from being restricted to the South, these cuts also occurred in relatively “liberal” states of the North,

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