



TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES

Racial Equity in Advocacy, Fact Sheet #10

September 2020

This fact sheet is the tenth in the *Racial Equity in Advocacy* series for social policy advocates addressing unequal opportunities by race. Each fact sheet will provide information equipping advocates to embed a racial equity lens into their work to close gaps and improve outcomes for communities of color. Please see the [first fact sheet](#) in the series for a review of key terms and concepts.

Since its inception, welfare, which has passed through numerous iterations including Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), has been embroiled in debate over the “deserving” versus “undeserving” poor. Though not overtly stated, race has always been a central criterion.

Historical Perspective

Providing cash aid to vulnerable families grew out of the early 20th century mother’s pension movement, which recognized that children fared better at home with their mothers than being placed in orphanages.ⁱ During the Great Depression, after local governments began struggling to make these payments, the federal government stepped in and developed Title IV of the Social Security Act, Aid to Dependent Childrenⁱⁱ, designed to permit primarily white widows—who were not expected to work—to remain home to care for their children.ⁱⁱⁱ

From the beginning, welfare has inadequately served families of color in both policy and implementation. There was no mention of anti-discrimination in the legislation and the program was administered by the states.^{iv} As a result, states could develop regulations and other means of discriminating against women of color.

Congress finally began loosening its eligibility rules in the 1960s, ADC was renamed AFDC, and the numbers of Black women recipients increased substantially.^v The rise in the number of women of color on the rolls, along with growing negative narratives about low-income people of color, contributed to the structural change of AFDC from an entitlement to a block grant

(TANF) in 1996. States were, again, charged with administering the program with little federal oversight.

The Role of Implicit Bias

Racist assumptions about people of color drive both policy development from the front end and implementation down to the local level. Research has shown that racial divisions, not weak labor party coalitions or institutional forces, led to the underdevelopment of the social safety net.^{vi} Though lacking empirical data supporting these claims, perceptions that communities of color lack “the individualism, ambition and ‘enterprising temperament’ of descendants of European immigrants,” are far-reaching in American society.^{vii} These negative narratives are responsible for modern welfare policies requiring work. These narratives assert that people of color must be compelled by policy to work because they come from cultures that do not value it. Racism obscures the truth. Communities of color derive as much dignity through work and take pride in their ability to provide for themselves and their families as other racial and ethnic groups.

Institutional Racism Today

The effects of past inequitable, and outright discriminatory, policies endure. The change in structure of AFDC from an entitlement to a block grant had many significant consequences. Black families are more likely than white families to live in states that spend the least on cash assistance and childcare.^{viii} They are also more likely than white families to live in the states with the lowest TANF benefit levels and that reach the fewest poor families.^{ix} All else being equal, states with larger Black populations tend to have less generous maximum benefits and income eligibility limits, provide TANF for a shorter period of time, and have harsher initial sanctions.^x Generally, Blacks and Hispanics are sanctioned at higher rates than whites after controlling for factors like their work history and the ages of their children.^{xi} TANF operates through caseworker discretion. The literature suggests that services like childcare, work readiness programs, education and training, and other supports are more often offered to white recipients than to Black and Hispanic recipients.^{xii}

For example, Mississippi has the highest state poverty rate. In state fiscal year 2015, Mississippi approved only 190 of more than 13,000 applications, or 1.4%.^{xiii} While experts have not been able to pinpoint the drastic change in the acceptance rate to any policy changes. The only other plausible explanation is politics. In 2011, both the governorship and the state House changed party control.^{xiv} Mississippi also shows disparity in who loses their TANF benefits. In fiscal year 2018, 79.9% of TANF recipients were Black and 16.6% were white. Closed case percentages were 86.6% Black and 12.3% white^{xv} with the majority of those cases closed for sanctions.^{xvi} Because sanctions are dealt at the discretion of the case manager, implicit bias can lead case managers to disproportionately sanction, and thus close, services for Black families.

The Way Forward

Eliminating racial differences in states' use of TANF funds would narrow the Black-white child-poverty gap by up to 15 percent.^{xvii} Armed with what we know about public perceptions of the poor and people of color, our federal government must live up to its responsibility as a protector of the people, especially underrepresented groups with the least amount of power. There must be more federal oversight in the use of TANF funds. While it may be difficult to bring TANF back to entitlement status in this political climate, it is not unreasonable to demand that funds be used for evidence-based purposes like cash assistance. The evidence supports that cash assistance helps to reduce poverty, while simultaneously stimulating the economy.^{xviii}

We cannot allow states, localities, and individual caseworkers—driven by implicit biases and prejudices—to dictate the opportunities granted to families of color. Until such changes in federal policy are made, advocates can push their state governments to devote a larger percentage of their funding for cash assistance.

ⁱ Moller, S. (2002). Supporting Poor Single Mothers: Gender and Race in the U.S. Welfare State. *Gender and Society*, 16(4), 465-484.

ⁱⁱ Lurie, I. (1974). Major Changes in the Structure of the AFDC Program Since 1935. *Cornell Law Review*, 59(5), 825-857. Retrieved from <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/clr/vol59/iss5/3>

ⁱⁱⁱ Gordon, L. and Batlan, F. (2011). *The Legal History of the Aid to Dependent Children Program*. Social Welfare History Project. Retrieved from <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/public-welfare/aid-to-dependent-children-the-legal-history/>

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Quadagno, J. (1994). *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

^{vi} Brown, H. (2013). Racialized Conflict and Policy Spillover Effects: The Role of Race in the Contemporary U.S. Welfare State. *American Journal of Sociology*, 119(2), 394-443. Retrieved from doi:10.1086/674005

^{vii} Flaherty, C. (2020, July 28). "U.S. and 'Them'". *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/28/leading-voice-welfare-reform-accused-racism>

^{viii} Burnside, A. and Schott, L. (2020). *States Should Invest More of Their TANF Dollars in Basic Assistance for Families*. Washington, DC: Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/how-states-use-funds-under-the-tanf-block-grant>

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Hahn, H., Aron, L., Lou, C., Pratt, E., and Okoli, A. (2017). *Why Does Cash Welfare Depend on Where You Live? How and Why State TANF Programs Vary*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/90761/tanf_cash_welfare_0.pdf

^{xi} McDaniel, M., Woods, T., Pratt, E., and Simms, M. C. (2017). *Identifying Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services: A Conceptual Framework and Literature Review* (OPRE Report #2017-69). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/identifying_racial_and_ethnic_disparities_b508.pdf

^{xii} Ibid.

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- ^{xiii} Williams, M. (2017). *TANF at 20 in Mississippi: A Path Out of Poverty or a Shrinking Safety Net?* Biloxi, MS: Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative. Retrieved from https://www.mschildcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2017-TANF-AT-20_1.5.16.pdf
- ^{xiv} Covert, B. and Israel, J. (2017, April 13). "Mississippi is rejecting nearly all of the poor people who apply for welfare". *ThinkProgress*. Retrieved from <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/mississippi-reject-welfare-applicants-57701ca3fb13/>
- ^{xv} McDaniel et al., 2017.
- ^{xvi} Williams, 2017.
- ^{xvii} Parolin, Z. (2019, June 13). "Welfare Money Is Paying for a Lot of Things Besides Welfare". *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/through-welfare-states-are-widening-racial-divide/591559/>
- ^{xviii} Kenny, C. (2015, September 25). "Give Poor People Cash". *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/welfare-reform-direct-cash-poor/407236/>