

# Tainted Policy

**Joan M. Sakalas**

Southern Vermont College, Bennington, USA  
Email: [jsakalas@svc.edu](mailto:jsakalas@svc.edu)

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## Abstract

The article revisits the 1996 revision of “welfare policy” in the United States. Often public policy is written and publicized in glowing terms that describe the wonderful changes we will see in the future. Unfortunately we often uncritically believe projected accomplishments of policy changes to be actual accomplishments. This article documents the gap between reality and publicity. It focuses on the demonization of single mothers and the justification of reduced societal responsibility for those living in poverty and outlines how we might re-envision policy that would be reality based.

## Keywords

AFDC, Coding, Criminals, Culture of Poverty, Discrimination, Livable Wage, Neo-Darwinism, Neo-Liberalism, Parents, Poverty, Racism, Single Mothers, Underclass, Unmarried Mothers, Welfare

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## 1. Introduction

We are living in a time when environmental disaster and “eternal war” are never far from our consciousness and unemployment plunges many middle class families into poverty. These challenges bring to mind Wordsworth’s sonnet:

The world is too much with us, late and soon,  
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers;  
Little we seen in nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
(Wordsworth, 2010)

Yet the fact is that we must reclaim “our hearts” and consider how we will live through this time and thrive. Change will require that we do more than one thing at a time and that we can see beyond the immediate moment.

Contemporary problems make clear that we cannot survive as discrete individuals. The United States must thoughtfully set goals and priorities and invest resources and energy. Our success will hinge on how honest we are about how and why we set our goals and whether we can change patterns that have led to the daunting challenges we face. As we are invested in a representative government, we need to insist that the government function on behalf of all of us and not as a lobby group for certain segments of society. Change is difficult, but it is absolutely essential right now. Meaningful change requires that we review how we got where we are and that we make corrections. This article considers one key piece of legislation, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, and asks whether this legislation has inscribed failure for families on welfare by offering them so little help that most cannot possibly achieve economic success.

Sometimes the name of a piece of congressional legislation obfuscates its impact, and this certainly is the case with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Its name suggests three issues that need clarification. First, whose “personal responsibility”, second, what “work opportunity”, and finally, what “reconciliation”? Although support of those living in poverty is not a burning topic today, the fact is that poverty is growing and the pool of low-skill employment opportunities continues to shrink. This article contests the foundational assumptions of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, questions the 1996 Act and subsequent renewals, and suggests issues that still need to be addressed by the Congress.

## 2. Well Fare?

Welfare is one of those words whose meaning has been transformed significantly over the years. In her history of single mothers on welfare, Linda Gordon points out that the word welfare once meant “well-being” and conjured up images of “prosperity, good health, and good spirits”. She notes, however, a critical narrowing and an accompanying negative connotation in contemporary uses of the term. Besides noting the change in connotation, Gordon demonstrates how contemporary usage was socially constructed to exclude benefits more widespread than the cash and food-stamp benefits given to Aid to Families with Dependent Children recipients. She draws a distinction between the entire “social system” of benefits and the single mother population now associated with the word “welfare”, focusing her book on the women not employed outside their homes (Gordon, 1994).

Further, Lois Bryson suggests that the word “welfare” should be changed to “elfare” or “ill-being” and contends that these new names would more accurately describe the realities of the programs in practice (Bryson, 1992). Where traditional liberalism defended a “bottom line” of governmental support to maintain a humane quality of life for all, neo-liberals and neo-conservatives in the late twentieth century claimed that this support crippled recipients and encouraged dependency on government largess. For example, Zillah Eisenstein argued that both Vice President Robert Dole and President William Clinton as candidates in the 1996 presidential election were neo-conservatives. As proof Eisenstein noted that tax breaks for corporations and legislation that advocated the removal of an inheritance tax were supported by both Dole and Clinton (Eisenstein, 1990).

## 3. Racial Coding

There is no way to avoid an exploration of racism and classism when reviewing the history of public assistance in the United States. Although, in fact, not all women receiving public assistance are African-American or women with shades of brown skin, women of color have been the focus of the most negative images and social hierarchies that hold racism and classism in place in welfare policy. A historical rereading unmasks assumptions used to justify policy and demonstrates how stories about women receiving public assistance have been adjusted to the needs of the political economy and to mainstream cultural values.

The perception that those who live in poverty are “deviant” and “criminal” was supported by Darwinian research in the nineteenth century. This view of families living in poverty was maintained to some degree throughout the twentieth century, and was revitalized by late-twentieth century neo-Darwinian research to support punitive measures against mothers living in poverty. An examination of changes in the construction of women’s roles in family and at work from the advent of industrialization reveals the differing expectations of white, bourgeois, working-class women and women living in poverty, especially African-American women.

## 4. New Criminals

In coded language, “quality of life” came to mean enforcement of mandates that generally removed the poor

from the view of those with economic privilege. Thus panhandlers were criminalized and the homeless driven deeper into the shadows (Morley, 1998). Morley argued that a primary purpose of the Republican “Contract with America” was “to make crime more costly for the poor and unemployed”. As unused “resources” poor men and women, like criminals and the insane, had to be managed so that their deviant behavior did not make others uncomfortable. In fact, this socially constructed linkage between criminality and poverty has been an unrelenting and continuous theme throughout the history of welfare policy.

In the nineteenth century, the United States government relied on total institutions that removed deviants from society and provided for their basic needs—to address the problems of men and women who did not comply with the prevailing norms of society. Poorhouses, orphanages, asylums, and prisons removed individuals from the mainstream of social intercourse. In the late twentieth century, resources were redirected away from treating the poor and mentally or emotionally challenged, toward a reliance on the prison as the one total institution to address deviance from social norms. This change had sinister results for families unable to support themselves. After the 1996 Act was implemented, politicians boasted about how many families they removed from the welfare rolls, but in cities like New York, records of why families were removed were not kept systematically.

Although the connection between criminality and poverty continues today, the way it is manifested has changed significantly. Since the nineteenth century, “some women’s everyday efforts to survive are not only discounted or invisible, but are increasingly *criminalized* in contemporary society” (Richie, 1996). In her study of incarcerated women, Beth Ritchie notes that women “whose lives are complicated by drug use, prostitution, illegal immigrant status, low literacy, and a criminal record continue to be misunderstood, underserved, isolated, and...in serious physical and emotional danger” (Richie, 1996).

As one woman put it, “If indeed, the idea is to segregate, to be biased, to create a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, then the welfare system is working” (Edin, 1997: p. 59). This trend to identify the poor with criminality has reinforced the possibility that erasure or removal from mainstream society rather than employment is, in fact, the desired outcome of welfare reforms.

## 5. Throwaway People

A 1980s analysis of several studies of mainstream attitudes toward welfare recipients documented a widespread willingness in mainstream America to perceive members of the African-American community negatively and on the basis of those perceptions to justify cuts in welfare spending (Gilens, 1999). As Patricia Williams argued, “Black people are wealth that can be thrown away, human capital that may be discarded...” (Williams, 1997). The 1996 Act extended this criminalization to all poor single mothers who by their deviance from middle-class norms were seen as dangerous and disposable and clearly cast welfare recipients as dangerous (US Congress, 1996).

Early welfare programs were developed to serve the needs of families without male support. Almost immediately after the establishment of these early programs, two schools of thought developed regarding women who were single parents. While the first regarded single parenthood as a sin, the second constructed it as pathology requiring treatment. Parenting among the poor at the turn of the nineteenth century was not counted as work and mothers unattached to males were considered a drain on society (Waring, 1997). Waring argues that when your labor was ignored, you were ignored. Because caring for children, maintaining a household, and cooking for a family were considered private, unpaid responsibilities of mothers, they were dismissed as real work. An impoverished mother either was required to live in a poorhouse where her children were separated from her or she had to find other ways to support herself and her family. Nineteenth-century social Darwinists offered moral justifications for the often meaningless work sponsored by the poorhouse, asserting that idleness and dependency destroy people.

In the name of science, social Darwinists conducted studies and made claims connecting immorality, low intelligence, and criminality with public relief. Studies claimed to prove that welfare relief created a legacy of dependency, with mothers and children locked into the destructive grip of the dole. Dr. Charles S. Hoyt, secretary of the New York State Board of Charities, concluded in a report published in 1875, after interviewing long-term inmates of insane asylums and orphanages, that there was a direct correlation between relief and permanent dependence on society (Piven, 1997). In the face of rapid industrialization, massive immigration from Europe, and the widespread dislocation of the newly freed black population, nineteenth century social scientists named poor families the most problematic social group (Piven, 1997).

## 6. Who Deserves Help?

The question of just who *deserved* public support became a central challenge of welfare policy in the twentieth century. Since so many of the groups who needed public support were from the margins of society, they became easy scapegoats. Without a critique of changing labor patterns and with entrenched biases against women living in poverty, single mothers were easily condemned and disqualified from benefits. Again there is a parallel between the history of women's experience in the United States prison system and the experience of mothers living in poverty. Nicole Rafter points out that African-American women were kept out of women's reformatories until the 1920s and forced to share prison quarters with men because they were seen as unworthy of reform (Rafter, 1992). So too from the turn of the century to the 1960s, there was a persistent pattern of denying aid to the children of unmarried mothers and especially African-American women on the basis that they were "undeserving" (Abramovitz, 1991). Lack of moral fitness and inability to work continued to be invoked as reasons to deny aid.

Some late twentieth-century critique of welfare recipients reads like a page out of the nineteenth-century social-Darwinist book. Former Secretary of Education, William Bennett, for example, referred to the "non-pathological poor," and turned poverty into a personal illness rather than a systemic problem of American society (Bennett, 1992). However, unfavorable contemporary images of poor women were not simply a Republican phenomenon. In *Welfare's End*, Gwendolyn Mink charged that Democrats made explicit in the discussion of the 1996 Act their condemnation of single mothers and suggested that "children should not have to pay for their mothers' sins, that welfare reform should 'be tough on parents, not tough on kids.'" She documented bipartisan agreement since the late 1960s "that mothers' poverty flows from moral failing" (Mink, 1995).

This renewal of neo-Darwinian arguments by neo-liberal politicians and social scientists to substantiate calls for "reform" requires further examination. For example, in *Losing Ground*, Charles Murray argued: "Some people are better than others. They deserve more of society's rewards, of which money is only one small part" (Murray, 1984). Further, he offered that justice involved allowing individuals to succeed or fail, live or die, as they are able or as he put it, "triage by self-selection" (Ibid.). These claims are dangerously reminiscent of arguments made to justify earlier justifications for punitive behavior motivated by racism and ethnocentrism and a twentieth century eugenics movement (Sklar, 1995).

Patricia Williams named Murray and Herrnstein, "pseudo-scientists" who posit "what purports to be fact" (Williams, 1997). By proposing that equality rather than justice was the issue and positing that equality was not possible, Murray and Herrnstein argued that the only remaining option "is an energetic and uncompromising recommitment to individualism" (Herrnstein, 1994). Elimination of welfare became nothing more than a justifiable exercise in *laissez faire* social policy in which the cream would rise to the top. Although Murray and Herrnstein's work was widely critiqued, the substance of the arguments played a powerful role in the framing of the 1996 legislation. A look at the "facts" cited in support of the legislation makes this absolutely clear (US Congress, 1996).

A refutation of these genetic and cultural arguments offered by Ruth Hubbard and Elijah Wald named this sense that the poor were genetically and culturally flawed, "hereditarianism". They argued:

Hereditarianism produced beautifully self-fulfilling prophecies. Since the children of the wealthy and educated usually turn out to be wealthy and educated, while the children of the poor tend to remain poor, it was quite clear to hereditarians that talent ran in the family (Hubbard, 1993).

The late twentieth-century embrace of social Darwinism avoided any structural analysis of the American political economy. Proponents engaged in a sleight of hand that blamed the victim, and in doing so, they supported racism and classicism. In her study of US social policy and cultural images, K. Sue Jewell argued that those African-American women in particular and the African-American community in general were the real subjects of references to the "culture of poverty". She saw the phrase as a coded reference blaming African-American women for "high teenage pregnancy rate, high school dropout rate, delinquency and so forth." Moreover, Jewell pointed out that the racial, gender and class components of this condemnation could not be missed or ignored (Jewell, 1993).

## 7. Unmarried Women Condemned

This gendered, racial, and ethnic base of welfare policy must be examined as the location of discrimination. In

her analysis of American welfare policy, Theresa Funiciello argued a cause-and-effect relationship between the United States' failure to significantly diminish poverty for women and their children and "the perception that blacks and other people of color dominate the poverty statistics" (Funiciello, 1993). A review of poverty statistics reveals a persistent pattern of poverty and a disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minorities among those living in poverty (Walker & Spohn, 1996).

As single motherhood increased, whether by choice or circumstances, women who violated prevailing white, heterosexual cultural standards for "a good woman", namely a married woman, were deemed the cause of society's failures. After all, these women violated the socially constructed vision of "natural" by bearing their children outside the threatened normative family setting. Barbara Omolade describes the way racism and economic injustices continue to be woven into analyses of Black communities in the United States.

The concept of a pathological underclass has become the rationale for continued racism and economic injustice; in attempting to separate racial from economic inequality and blaming family pathology for Black people's condition, current ideology obscures the system's inability to provide jobs, decent wages, and adequate public services for the Black poor. (Omolade, 1994)

Rather than address economic and social conditions that hold poverty in place, the focus in the late twentieth century was on moral generalizations that condemned families and discouraged effective remedies. Charles Murray's words in a *Philadelphia Enquirer* article captured the racist base of prevailing stories: "the brutal truth is that American society as a whole could survive when illegitimacy became epidemic within a comparatively small ethnic minority. It cannot survive the same epidemic among whites" (Murray, 1993). In fact, there has been a steady decrease in births to unmarried women in the African-American community since 1970 (Pearce, 1994). This mythology prevailed and facts were sacrificed to racism.

Late-twentieth-century welfare rhetoric tended to reduce welfare issues to either/or choices held in place by supporting assumptions about mothers receiving public assistance. If one group of mothers was portrayed as "good" for America, another was portrayed as "bad". Negative stories of mothers receiving welfare were embedded and popularized and welfare recipients were constructed as members of a dysfunctional "culture". In particular, two cultural models of single mothers, the lazy mother and mother as victim, were promoted in support of the 1996 legislation. Use of these models made it possible for policy makers to transform recipients from abstract "women on welfare" to women with faces and unacceptable behaviors.

An NBC Evening News feature highlighted the use of a seventy-five year old Idaho statute against a seventeen-year-old single mother, charging her with "fornication". Her request for welfare assistance triggered the charge. Although the District Attorney invoked the Ten Commandments as the authority for the law, the indictment delivered more than a moral message about sexual misconduct. It sent a message to the community that an unemployed, unmarried, young woman who became pregnant was a threat to the community. Her sentence, which required attendance at parenting skills classes, made it clear that the court considered her application for public assistance proof that she lacked the skills to be a fit mother (Brokaw, 1996). Not only was it assumed that she was a bad woman for her unacceptable sexual behavior, but also that she would be a *bad* mother who lacked parenting skills.

## 8. Poverty as the "Evil Empire"

In post-Cold War United States, public assistance for poor, single mothers provided a rich focal point for the politics of demonization. Zygmunt Bauman argued that with the fall of the "Evil Empire", the national enemy moved from without our borders to within and was posited in the "underclass" (Zygmunt, 1998). The principles that led many to the streets to secure rights for all United States citizens in the 1950s and 1960s were abandoned at the end of the twentieth century as a new cold war was waged against the culture of poverty. The creation of such categories as the "culture of poverty" and "the underclass" along with negative characterizations of welfare recipients justified policies and programs designed to alter and control women's behavior. Herbert Gans pointed out that the phrase "culture of poverty" was associated with anthropologist, Oscar Lewis. Lewis described "traits" of the poor and suggested that the poor pass on these traits from generation to generation and tend to fail to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves (Gans, 1995). Essentially "the underclass" described a sub-basement of classes, a catch-all for those whose behavior and status were socially unacceptable. By avoiding analyses of poverty and focusing on individual poor men, women, and children, inequality was turned into

culture—a “culture of poverty”.

## 9. Defining the Culture of Poverty

Economic extremes became an acceptable norm when politicians shed governmental responsibility for the poorest citizens of the United States. An imaginary distinction was drawn between the “worthy” poor and the “unworthy” poor. While compensation and assistance were extended to men and women who lost their homes in floods, tornadoes, and wild fires in the name of helping neighbors, men and women unable to find sufficient work to support their families were told that assistance was making them dependent. To be poor was cast as a moral issue. To become poor through an act of “God” was a practical issue. This divide between the deserving and undeserving created a moral framework for condemnation of poor men and women and justified their punishment.

If the undeserving poor do not alter their values and practices voluntarily, they must be forced to do so, for example by ending welfare payments, placing illegitimate children into foster care or orphanages, and by other kinds of punishment. (Gans, 1995)

Thus an ideology of poverty was created wherein the undeserving shared common values that were unacceptable to middle-class society. The behaviors of these poor women justified draconian measures. Such “correction” was seen as moral and, in fact, for the good of the poor.

Another step taken in the redefinition of poverty involved an embrace of a sense of just reward by those accumulating wealth. Throughout the discussions of reform, poverty was portrayed as a choice rather than an economic state to be expected in a capitalist society. Late twentieth century secular neo-Calvinism asserted that wealth was a “just dessert” for hard work and that holding on to wealth was a right. In fact, while we were urged to be uncritical of accumulated wealth, we were urged to punish the poor for their poverty.

For example, without citing any supporting data, James Payne condemned schools that provided prenatal care for unwed students and argued that we needed to return to the days when “girls who got ‘in trouble’ were whispered about—and expelled from school.” (Gans, 1995) Like William Bennett, Charles Murray, and Gertrude Himmelfarb, Payne described “social disapproval” as the stick that would force the submission of these young, poor mothers to more acceptable behavior. While he condemned charity, arguing that “sympathetic giving weakens the social disapproval of harmful behavior by appearing to endorse it,” he demonized and pathologized poor mothers for their “dysfunctional” lifestyle, and portrayed them as the cause of their own poverty (Gans, 1995).

The practice of conflating single mothers with addicts, criminals, and the homeless under the popular category “underclass” yielded two results—contradictory messages directed to mothers receiving public assistance and a declaration of guilt by association.

On the one hand, to care for their families they must find some means of financial support....On the other hand, to raise a child with the help of state support is defined as a sign of unhealthy dependence and of their failure as “good” mothers. (Naples, 1998)

## 10. Discrimination: Moral Justification

Being named underclass amounted, then, to a moral judgment of a woman’s character. Welfare recipients were accused of deliberately transmitting a culture of poverty intergenerationally (Fineman, 1995). Gertrude Himmelfarb made clear her conception of the characteristics of this common culture in a series of rhetorical questions in her study of modern values.

When we speak of the “social pathology” of crime, drugs, violence, illegitimacy, promiscuity, pornography, illiteracy, are we not making a moral judgment about that “pathology”? Or when we describe the “cycle of welfare dependency”, or the “culture of poverty”, or the “demoralization of the underclass”, are we not defining that class and that culture in moral terms, and finding them wanting in those terms. (Himmelfarb, 1995)

Indeed, Himmelfarb labeled the contemporary moral position of the state with regard to poverty as “moral neutrality” (Ibid.). However, Himmelfarb wasn’t alone in her construction of poverty as pathological. Robert Bork wrote that “the social chaos and the accompanying personal tragedies that have become routine today: high

rates of crime and low rates of punishment, high rates of illegitimate births, subsidized by welfare, and high rates of family dissolution through no-fault divorce” (Bork, 1997).

Yet public policy is never neutral. From the New Deal legislation through the War on Poverty, government policy made clear the state’s assumption of some responsibility for families unable to provide adequately for themselves. However, Himmelfarb’s real point was that poverty must be seen as a moral and personal failure. Her entire epilogue in *A De-moralized Society* distinguished the modern “liberal” notions of morality from “true” Victorian standards (Himmelfarb, 1995). By dividing morality into personal and political, she engaged in a rhetorical sleight of hand that condemned poor mothers. Indeed, this assertion that poor men and women were morally defective was used to justify the harshest responses of government.

Even the judgment that poor mothers were members of a “culture of poverty” is problematic. Such a generalized claim that a depraved class exists is suspect and must be interrogated in the same way we would challenge the notion of one “black culture” or one “white culture” in the United States. By reducing all poor people to one culture, their erasure is facilitated. This practice of generalizing has been used to characterize enemies in every war and continues to be used by hate groups. Such names as Gooks, Waps, and Niggers were used historically to depersonalize and dehumanize. The words “culture of poverty” sound more genteel but lead to the same white-wash of hatred.

## 11. Defining the “Bad Mother”

This rhetorical trickery is made clear when we contrast the name “culture of poverty” with the rubric “working poor.” The “badness” of the poor mother would be erased if she only were middle-class or married to a working male. With a rise in class or a connection to a male, she would be called a homemaker rather than a bad mother. Instead of being a participant in the culture of poverty she would move up the status ladder as a member of the working poor, losing her designation as bad mother by virtue of her connection to a man and the presence of an income, however meager. Heterosexual privilege and participation in a nuclear family framed the condemnation and averted attention from deeper structural injustices holding poverty in place. Yet in this country where there is a level of unemployment equal to approximately eleven million men and women, where 6 percent unemployment is considered desirable, unemployment is a fact, not a moral failing (US Department of Labor, 2014).

However, in order to construct a compelling case for the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, faces were painted on the generalized bodies of welfare recipients. Like soap opera characters, images of welfare recipients were offered in graphic detail. For example, the image of welfare recipient as bad mother portrayed her as lazy, sitting on her couch, watching game shows and soaps, probably waiting for “her man” while her children were running the streets.

One popular accusation charged that mothers receiving public assistance were oversexed. Implicit in this accusation was the assumption that these “oversexed” women probably tricked men into impregnating them. Theresa Funiciello challenged this charge and pointed out that according to the welfare compensation formula, housekeeping income decreased as the number of persons in the household increased. Further, she reported that “seventy-three percent of all AFDC households have two or fewer children” (Funiciello, 1993). In fact, even the generalization that all mothers receiving public assistance were unmarried must be challenged.

In fact, many mothers who raised children alone were married or in long-term relationships (Funiciello, 1993).

Condemnatory rhetoric often used a kind of doublespeak. In a *New York Times* article by Eloise Anderson, she prefaced her comments with the sentence, “AFDC recipients are not stupid” (Anderson, 1995). However, the comments that followed made clear that Anderson meant to insult “AFDC recipients” and suggest that they are stupid.

If we, the welfare bureaucracy, do our jobs and provide them with pregnancy prevention information, including telling them how to say no—and sending the same message to wouldbe fathers, we might be surprised at how much they have in common with those of us not living on public dependency. (Anderson, 1995)

With her arch comments Anderson suggested that poor women either did not receive or ignored information on contraception, or they simply did not know how to “say no”. On the one hand the mother receiving public assistance was condemned for behaving irresponsibly by ignoring or not obtaining sound information about con-

trapection. On the other hand, her poverty was attributed to out-of-control sexuality. Neither image was positive; both suggested possible hyper sexuality, irresponsibility, an inability to defer gratification, and possible use of childbirth for economic gain.

Robert Bork compounded the negative stereotype by arguing, “the main drawback is that these are mostly young women of substandard intelligence, self-discipline, and motivation; otherwise they would not be in the predicament they are” (Bork, 1997). Both Anderson and Bork constructed mothers receiving public assistance as the cause of their own poverty and either shifted responsibility to the individual poor mothers or portrayed mothers as so beyond help that a *laissez faire* approach was most appropriate. Such claims were made without supporting data yet were presented as fact.

The condemnation escalated as long-term dependency on Aid for Dependent Children was constructed as “at the center of the nation’s worst social ills including child abuse, school failure, drug addiction, homelessness, and crime” (Mead, 1996). The irrationality of these claims was illustrated in a roundtable discussion on battered women and abused children. Republican presidential nominee, Robert Dole, a participant in the discussion, reinforced the accusation that child abuse and domestic abuse must be included in the litany of poor mothers’ crimes. “Asked...what welfare had to do with domestic violence, Mr. Dole said, ‘Oh it has a lot to do with domestic violence’” (Seelye, 1996). Indeed there was a connection between domestic violence and mothers without economic options. However, if domestic violence were to be taken seriously by politicians, the focus would need to be on assistance and safety for the subjects of domestic violence and effective legislation and programs to address the pervasive problem of family and domestic partner violence. Instead the Violence against Women Act of 1996 is threatened with reduction every time it is introduced in Congress.

Underlying assumptions were based on inadequate and distorted information. First-hand stories of broad racial and ethnic representatives of mothers receiving public assistance were excluded from the process of analysis and identification of policy issues to be addressed. As proof that the legislation would meet the needs of families living in poverty, “poster families” were trotted out when they lent support to framers of the legislation. Stories and assumptions about mothers receiving public assistance gave license to behaviors toward recipients that denied their competency, exploited their labor, and generally denigrated their families.

## 12. Conclusion: What Needs to Be Done?

One clear accomplishment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 was to remove a sense of communal, mutual responsibility from the government’s mission, at least with regard to families living in poverty. That this erasure of responsibility was selective was apparent in the American response to the September 11 tragedy, Hurricane Katrina, and the BP oil crisis. The American government and people provide stunning evidence of their sense of caring and mutual responsibility for those most directly affected. The argument is not whether we can help, it is, can we help more. Yet when faced with the ongoing facts of hungry children, homeless families, unemployment, and scandalously underperforming schools, the sense of zeal and mutual responsibility is not there.

The process of writing policy is never neutral. However, certain steps could assure a more just process of re-framing welfare legislation. Tinkering with bad legislation simply makes more bad legislation. First, the process of revision must involve many voices and many people with differing interests in the conversation, especially people most affected by welfare policy. This means that the testimony of those most directly affected must be privileged over social scientists. In fact, care must be taken to find data that is not politically skewed to support specific legislation. Anything can be proven with bad research. Congress needs to support legislation that is reputable and rely on research that does not use a particular moral position as the starting point.

Second, discussions of families living in poverty must be linked to the socio-economic realities of the United States in the twenty-first century. The “fairy tale” of prosperity and opportunity for all must be replaced by the fact of underachieving school systems; inadequate health care; inadequate, substandard, or non-existent child-care; dangerous or unacceptable housing and neighborhoods; and inadequate wages. Billing, student loans, financial services and even technical advice are outsourced by US companies to countries where workers are paid a fraction of our minimum wage. Even though millions in the United States need work, our government does little to curtail this trend. While legislators speak about making jobs, profits in fact seem to be the driving force in our business behavior. Even our rhetoric often demonstrates this obfuscation of reality. We now refer to “hunger” as “food challenged” and families receiving any kind of social service as “consumers”, as though they were



shopping.

We must address how we can move toward both a more equitable distribution of resources and the eradication of poverty in the United States. Poverty for a family of three is defined by the most recent figures as below \$19,090 (US Department of Health & Human Services). Yet we know that a family of three cannot live on that amount. The State of Vermont in 2009 estimated that a “livable wage” for a single parent with two children would be \$59,446 (Vermont Joint Fiscal Office, 2009). However, Vermont’s minimum wage of \$8.73 per hour results in a yearly gross income of \$18,158.40 if the employee works forty hours per week (US Department of Labor). Even Vermont, a state with a minimum wage that exceeds the federal minimum of \$7.75 per hour results in an insufficient wage. This is the working poor! We must ask who is served by the fiction that anyone can live on the wages of a minimum or low-wage job. Legislation framed on the basis of racism, classism, and distortions of reality fray the fabric of American democracy that we claim to value.

Before we continue to allow the 1996 welfare legislation to dictate standards, we must acknowledge that the 1996 Act is seriously flawed. Underlying assumptions were based on inadequate and distorted information. First-hand stories of broad racial and ethnic representatives of mothers receiving public assistance were excluded from the process of analysis and identification of policy issues to be addressed. “Poster families” lent support to framers of the legislation. Stories and assumptions about mothers receiving public assistance gave license to behaviors toward recipients that denied their competency, exploited their labor, and generally denigrated their families. We do not imagine that every millionaire accumulated his wealth by promoting a “Ponzi” scheme. Yet, we accept stories about “welfare cheats” as representative of all recipients.

Legislation must be based on the broad realities of changes in the global economic picture and any re-visioning must examine corporate connections to poverty. The objectives of welfare supports must be changed and broadened to include all that do not have access to adequate wages and other material and social resources including quality education, housing, health care, and child care. The concept of “all” needs to include immigrants and the working poor. The widening gap between the wealthiest in America and the rest of us must change. The reality is that some must have less so that others do not need to worry about their basic needs. Gainful work has always been a cornerstone of identity in the United States. However, with corporate outsourcing of jobs and diminished need for factory labor we have severely diminished the number of unskilled positions. In addition, our minimum wage continues at an inadequate level by every standard and in every state.

We bail out “super” banks and claim that we cannot ask for more tax money from millionaires because they “create jobs”. What we could ask is, if they really create jobs, what are they waiting for? Yes, perhaps they create jobs in “underdeveloped” countries where they pay incredibly low wages and can ignore safety practices required in the United States, but as a result there are few jobs created in the United States and massive profits for the owners of big businesses who outsource.

Finally, we must reconsider exactly what the “social contract” will be right now and we have several contracts that are dependent upon race, ethnicity, gender, and economic status. With the passage of the 1996 Act, the United States government engaged in an insidious doublespeak, claiming to act on behalf of the poor while it was facilitating their condemnation permanently to the American “underclass”. Now the notion of alleviating poverty has moved even farther from the national consciousness as we engage in war on two fronts—an eternal war against “global terrorism” and another near-eternal war that seems linked with an imperialist United States goal of “democratizing” other countries whether the people want democracy or not. Meanwhile, our leadership loses its moral currency daily as we demonstrate our stunning inability to provide for the most basic needs of our children and their parents. If we can pay \$35,000 to “warehouse” a single prisoner for one year, what do we owe our neighbor who cannot access what she needs? Do we still believe in quality public education, in decent housing, in health care for all, and child care for families that work? Or, in fact, are quality and services available only to those who can afford them? Is everything for sale?

Many who today wrap themselves in the flag and speak in passionate tones about American democracy and values demonstrate, with their willingness to abandon hard fought rights, that they have little understanding of the values that distinguish the United States from oppressive societies. The “Patriot Act of 2001” was passed and expanded by Congress without the blink of an eye. Our privacy is diminished daily and the Supreme Court declares that corporations are individuals. This is not some fantasy dystopia; it is the United States. The American emperor and his minions must feel the breezes. We need to stand up and speak of reality. Simply declaring that we are great does not make it so.

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