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Vassar College

The Bootstraps Have Snapped:

The Stigmatization of Those on American Welfare in Present Day

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

Edmond Tyler Boyle

Thesis Advisers:

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April 2019

## The Bootstraps Have Snapped:

### The Stigmatization of Those on American Welfare in Present Day

Growing up on welfare, I never quite knew the role that the American welfare system played in my life. I knew that it meant that my mom would whisper at the grocery store when using her Food Stamp card and that it meant I did not have to pay for school meals like my classmates because of the Free Lunch that I received, however, I was unaware of the stigma that those on welfare experience daily. That is, until I had some traumatizing experiences with my enrollment on various welfare programs. In this thesis, I plan to show how the welfare system was not originally one of stigmatization, but rather a system meant to help poor, white men get back on their feet after the effects of World War I and the Great Depression. It was not until the War on Poverty, when African-American women could apply for welfare programs that the welfare system and those receiving welfare gained the stigma associated with them today. I plan to show that the rhetoric of pulling oneself up by their bootstraps is not something that can happen because the bootstraps have snapped. It is America's fault as a state that there are those living in poverty and having to make tough choices for their own survival, and not the fault of those living in poverty for being poor. And the rhetoric that is used is one of a very stigmatizing nature, often making conversations about class of a stigmatizing manner, thus harming those who are living on welfare or in poverty.

*To Mumzy:*

---

*She was just sixteen  
And all alone when I came to be  
So we grew up together  
Our mama-child and me  
Now things were bad and she was scared  
But whenever I would cry  
She'd calm my fear and dry my tears  
With a rock and roll lullaby*

*We made it through the lonely days  
But, Lord, the nights were long  
And we'd dream of better mornin's  
When mama sang a song  
Now I can't recall the words at all  
It don't make sense to try  
'Cause I just knew lotsa love came through  
In that rock and roll lullaby*

---

*-B. J. Thomas, Rock and Roll Lullaby*

*The past 22 years have not been easy, but somehow you always made it work. You kept me fed,  
you kept me clothed, you kept a roof over my head—but more important, you kept me  
loved. Without you, this thesis—or anything else for that matter—would not be possible.*

*Cheers to our respective futures and seeing where we will go.*

*XOXO,*

*Babycakes*

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## CHAPTER ONE:

### AN INTRODUCTION: THE UNINFORMEDNESS OF WELFARE AND THE POOR

Growing up poor, I am familiar first hand with the fact that people do not know the ins and outs of the American welfare system. And, while I have a familiarity with it, I am not certain entirely what happens with welfare outside of my own personal situation. I have my own experiences to draw from, but do not know the overlaying features of the welfare system across Kentucky, let alone the entire welfare system in America. It is my goal in this thesis to draw from my personal experiences, as well as the research I have done to normalize conversations surrounding class and economic position, as well as provide more information about the history of the welfare state, to break down stereotypes as who is poor and who is part of the welfare programs that we have in the American welfare system, and to showcase how those who are poor or living on welfare are negatively stigmatized because of their economic position—something that is not the fault of the poor but rather a fault of the state and capitalism as a whole.

There is a lack of knowledge and information from people about who is on welfare. From a Huffington Post survey about what Americans thought about those on welfare, “Survey respondents’ estimation of who receives welfare tracked closely to their estimation of who gets food stamps. Nearly two-thirds of poll respondents said the program’s recipients are mostly Black or that there are as many Black Americans as white Americans receiving benefits. Only 21 percent correctly said there are more white than Black food stamp recipients, (Delaney and Edwards-Levy 2018). This shows that a majority of people assume that the “typical” person on welfare is Black, which is not true, but rather, a stereotypical, stigmatizing view to hold. This stereotype inherently stigmatizes all of those on welfare, as well as those who are living in poverty but are not on welfare. In fact, fifty-nine percent of Americans say either that most

welfare recipients are Black, or that welfare reciprocity is about the same among Black and white people (Delaney and Edwards-Levy 2018). However, the truth is that Medicaid had more than 70 million beneficiaries in 2016, of whom 43 percent were white, 18 percent Black, and 30 percent Hispanic. Of 43 million food stamp recipients that year, 36.2 percent were white, 25.6 percent Black, 17.2 percent Hispanic and 15.5 percent unknown (Delaney and Edwards-Levy 2018) thus showing that white people actually have higher rates of welfare use than Black folks—something that stems from the original intention of the welfare system, something that will be discussed in chapter three.

### **A Beginning Discussion of Social Stigma**

People who are living in poverty or are on welfare face social stigmatization on a normal basis. When discussing stigma, sociologist Erving Goffman showcases how stigmatization demarcates a person from a valid person to a disposable person. He says, “While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind.... He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one,” (Goffman 1963: 2-3). In this case, when it becomes evident that someone is from a lower class, a person from a higher class automatically characterizes the poor person as less than and thus a tainted person. He continues, “By definition, of course, we believe that the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively...reduce [their] life chances,” (1963: 5). Because of the way that people living on welfare or in poverty are viewed, they also have lower life chances because of the way the stigmatization affects their personhood.

There is a lot of social stigma for those living in poverty or on welfare because many people do not know precisely who is living in poverty, but rather, have stereotypical images in their head of who they assume poor people to be. This comes from negative associations of poor people as discussed by politicians and in social policy change. According to Mink, “Policy-makers have negated the mother-work of poor women partly because of *who* they imagine welfare mothers to be,” (Mink [1998] 2002: 22). To avoid stigmatization (and really have any kind of reform), we need to understand who is on welfare today. But rather, politicians and the general American public imagine welfare mothers to be, “reckless breeders who bear children to avoid work,” (Mink [1998] 2002: 22). These images create a stigmatizing effect for those living in poverty, when, in reality, “seventy-two percent of mothers receiving welfare have no more than two children, and 61 percent of recipient mothers do not bear children while on welfare,” (Mink [1998] 2002: 33) thus showcasing the inherently wrong assumptions people have for those on welfare.

Because not everyone who is living in poverty, is on welfare, it is also important to discuss those statistics. In 2017, the official poverty rate in 2017 was 12.3 percent with a total of 39.7 million people living in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2017). The 2017 census counted 16 million poor whites, almost 9 million poor Blacks and just over 10 million poor Hispanics. By contrast, however, the poverty rate among Hispanics was 16%, among Blacks 20%, and only 8% (or two to three times more) than poor whites which had a poverty rate of 8% (US Census 2017; KKF 2017, taken format from Rusk 1999: 105) thus showing the uneven representation of poverty rates among race.

Because poverty is affected by race, it is clear that poverty is an intersectional issue. Therefore, intersectionality is important to talk about when discussing any kind of identity based issue.

Identity intersects in a variety of ways that makes up an individual, and if identity intersects then so does the stigma associated with each different identity, thus creating unique forms of stigmatization across all identities for an individual. According to Collins and Bilge,

“Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events of conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves,” (2016: 2).

This discussion of intersectionality shows the importance of employing an intersectional approach when dealing with any identity category because of the importance that each identity plays in an individual. According to Hancock, “The argument for an intersectional approach to identity is significantly strengthened by the history...concerning the enduring marginalization faced by single, poor African-American mothers within their racial group and their gender group,” (Hancock 2004: 63). By talking about identity and stigmatization in terms of intersectionality, one gains a lot from the discussion and will be able to see how identity intersects and affects people across many different identities.

As Goffman continues his discussion of stigma, he showcases the intersectional identity of the ideal person who is not stigmatized in society. He says, “In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight,

and height, and a recent record of sports,” (1963: 128). While this piece was written over fifty years ago, this still holds true—at least, for the most part. Anyone who falls outside of any of the aforementioned categories is stigmatized and must grapple with various issues that being stigmatized causes, most usually psychological costs and feelings of not being enough. Therefore, intersectionality is so important to discuss because each person has a different set of identities that make up their personhood. However, some identities play more stigmatizing roles in the development of stigmatization for those individuals while others offer individuals various forms of privilege.

It is my claim, here, that class is a major stigmatizing force that is often not talked about because of the lack of information and knowledge about class issues in America and basic understandings of how to talk about class and issues surrounding poverty. For example, poverty affects the poor in ways that are sometimes entirely hidden from those not living in poverty. “Poverty rarely allows you to plan for the future, as your thoughts are consumed by how you will make your budget stretch to the end of the week, or how you will put food on the table today,” (Keilthy 2018). This creates an interesting dynamic for poor people, because they cannot physically think ahead to the future, but rather people living in poverty must plan a day—or sometimes hours—in advance, which is something that people who come from money have the privilege of not having to worry about.

This creates an interesting dynamic when those who are stigmatized and those who are not meet. As Goffman continues, “When normals and stigmatized do in fact enter one another’s immediate presence, especially when they there attempt to sustain a joint conversational encounter, there occurs one of the primal scenes of sociology; for, in many cases, these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both

sides,” (Goffman 1963: 13). This reminds me of a story from high school from a friend who said, behind my back, that the only reason I got into Vassar was because I was poor and gay. This interaction, for one, completely devalued my hard work and dedication to my studies in high school because my “friend” was putting my sexuality and my socioeconomic status at the forefront of my college application, as opposed to my excellent grades and exhaustive list of extra-curricular activities. By making the statement that he did, he inherently divided the two of us across socioeconomic lines which meant that whenever we interacted in the future, especially in terms of other scholastic achievements throughout my senior year of high school, I was constantly thinking about his thoughts about my deservingness in comparison with my socioeconomic status. Goffman says that this is not an uncommon experience for those who are stigmatized. He says, “Now, it is apparent that...lower class persons are all likely ... to find themselves functioning as stigmatized individuals, unsure of the reception awaiting them in face-to-face interaction and deeply involved in the various responses to this plights,” (Goffman 1963: 146), which makes for an additional emotional and psychological burden for those who are poor, thus having to think about how they may be viewed or accepted into various social spaces with other individuals at any given time.

This stigmatization occurs because of a dominant class ideology in America: the fact that there is an assumption that one can pull themselves up by the bootstraps and “make it if they really try,” (Neubeck 2006: 33). But we know this is not true. Rather, we know that poorness is a social construction of the state. We know that, “Societies characterized by high levels of discrimination also usually have highly segregated labor markets where wages for the same kind of work differ across groups. Disadvantaged group members may be excluded altogether from many better-paying jobs and thus have to settle for less desirable jobs, whose wages are in turn

driven lower by higher levels of competition from others in a similar situation,” (Iceland 2013: 90). This means that the disadvantaged groups because of a race or gender or sexual orientation—all things that cannot be chosen—are targeted because of their characteristics and thus are thrust into a worse economic situation. These individuals are stigmatized because of their identity and then further stigmatized because of their economic situation.

### **A Personal History with Welfare**

Quickly, I’d like to highlight four brief experiences of my own growing up on welfare to showcase the more specific nature of welfare and how it affects individuals on a more personal basis. The four incidents I chose to highlight deal with Free and Reduced Lunch; Section 8, a housing program for low-income families; Food Stamps, money for needy families who need to buy food for their household; and Medicaid, health insurance for low income families. The incidents are as follows:

In August of 2008, I was in fifth grade. I was in the lunch line at school with my tray of food. I went to punch in my school identification number and a big red box popped up on the screen that said *insufficient funds*. The cashier asked me if I had reapplied for the Free and Reduced Lunch program which my mom handled for me each academic year. I thought she had, but apparently, something had not yet gone into the system. So, because I did not have the cash money to pay for lunch, the cashier took my tray off of the lunch line and handed me a paper plate with a cheese sandwich—a piece of American cheese in between two slides of white bread—and with mayonnaise on the side. She said that I would need to reapply for Free Lunch before I would be allowed to take the regular school lunch again. After leaving the lunch line, I went and sat down with my friends who shared some of the food they had gotten in the lunch line.

This experience made me feel extremely uncomfortable and very awkward. Having to walk around the lunch room with a paper plate instead of a school lunch tray with a piece of food that looked, quite honestly, pathetic made me a mark of stigma in the lunchroom that day. All of my classmates and friends knew that because of the paper plate in my hand, I was not able to afford lunch. There were whispers and stares for this was not something that normally happened—it was a strange and rare occurrence in the school lunchroom. I then had to make up lies about not having enough money for food, rather than discussing my socioeconomic status with my classmates.

The second experience I would like to highlight comes from my experience with Section 8 Housing. In 2014, my mother received a text from our landlord asking where our portion of the rent was. With Section 8, my mom only had to pay \$24 a month for rent, while Section 8 paid the rest. However, our landlord was texting asking for a total of \$335 by the end of the week. My mom was confused, and I was nervous, because if we did not pay rent in time, we could literally be kicked out of our home. After getting the text, my mom called the Section 8 office and asked what was going on. She was told because of her part time job of substitute teaching at the high school, she was no longer a qualified recipient of the amount of Section 8 we were previously receiving. She was making \$8.10/hour and not working every day, but still expected to pay \$335 a month for rent.

Working a part time job meant that my mom was in a worse economic situation than if she did not work. If she did not work, our rent was covered, our food stamps were there, and we both had medical insurance. However, when she decided to work, all of this was taken away. The text from the landlord was very unapologetic and demanded that she pay the rent immediately—a huge stress for both my mom and me because of the fact that if she did not pay

the rent, we would have been evicted from our home which we had lived in for the past twelve years.

Another experience that I experienced has to do with Food Stamps. Sometime during my sophomore year in college, my mom received a letter in the mail saying that she was no longer eligible for Food Stamps or SNAP benefits unless she could prove that she was disabled or started working or volunteering for at least ten hours per week. The letter did not give any help as to where my mom was supposed to start working or where she could find places that needed volunteers, but rather told her that if she did not start doing these things, she would no longer have money to buy food.

This did not affect me directly as I was living on campus at school and not eating at home, but I did think a lot about my mom's food insecurity at home while I was at school. It took up a lot of mental space in my already overcrowded head with academic knowledge and caused a lot of emotional distress, too. However, I experienced firsthand the effects of losing Food Stamps when I returned home for breaks during the school year and the kitchen cabinets were bare. My mom always seemed to make it work, always having food for the table. She has a job now which allows her to keep her Food Stamps, which is nice, but there is still that insecurity that if she ever loses her job or the facility that she works at has to close down, that she will yet again be food insecure.

The fourth and final experience I would like to share is one that happened just back in March. On March 10, the first day of Spring Break for Vassar students, I received a phone call from my diabetes supplier. The voice told me that they could not ship my diabetic supplies because there was a problem with my Kentucky Medicaid insurance. They told me that I needed to call Medicaid directly to see if I could fix the issue myself. I immediately called Medicaid to

see what the issue was. According to the customer service representative, at the end of February the state of Kentucky requested my termination from its Medicaid provider and I no longer had health insurance. I started crying immediately and struggled to get through the remainder of the phone call before I completely broke down. The first thing that I thought of was the fact that I, a Type I Diabetic, had no health insurance. So, if something were to happen to me and I ended up in the hospital, I would have to pay those expenses out of pocket—a financial burden that I do not have the means to handle. I was panicked and had no idea what to do besides call my mom. So, I did. She then had to rework her schedule so that she could go directly to the office of Community Based Services and see what the issue was. After about three weeks of jumping through various hoops, making approximately fifteen phone calls to Medicaid, my pharmacy, all my doctors, and my diabetic supply provider, I was reinstated as a Medicaid recipient and was back to having health insurance.

I believe this was the scariest experience I have ever had because if something had gone wrong at any point during those five weeks when I did not have health insurance, the financial burden would have been insurmountable. I was also not able to get my prescriptions for five weeks, which means I am five weeks behind on supplies. This means that I have to make tough decisions regarding my health, as in whether I leave my insulin pump in longer than the recommended three days or if I attempt to buy some cheap syringes at the pharmacy and take my insulin that way until I am able to catch up on ordering my supplies. From this experience, I will certainly never take health insurance for granted again.

I share these experiences because one, I want to normalize conversations surrounding class and economic position and I wanted to take space to practice that here. I also share it to highlight the fact that being poor literally consumes every aspect of one's life. For if one does

not have money, they may not have access to food, or a house, or health insurance—all basic necessities that should be considered a fundamental human right in this country.

From these experiences growing up, as well as the multitude of others that I have in my back pocket, it is clear that people do not like talking about money, nor do they like talking about welfare. Because people do not talk about money on a regular basis, often shying away from financial discussions if they ever come up, people do not have experience in talking about money. And because no one has experience in talking about money, when the issue of money comes up, people who are in unique economic positions are often stigmatized because of their economic position.

This is because, historically social programs in the U.S. have been geared toward assisting and supporting white working class and poor men. In the process of assisting this group of Americans these social programs were considered to be the least that America could do for this population. In 1920's when the first welfare program was established, there were millions of white men and their families who benefitted from these programs (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980). Before the 1960's, the social programs were associated with white people did not stigmatize, criminalize, or dehumanize the recipients. However, in the late 1960's the social programs began to be associated with poor white people and all Black people exclusively. Thus, the programs and their recipients began to be demonized. The social programs were seen as a handout to the recipients in spite of the fact that the program hadn't changed much since their inception. The way the program was framed changed in the media and the recipients were given the impression that they were not worthy and did not have value. The recipients on the programs were referred to as 'lazy' 'drug addicts' 'didn't want to work' and 'welfare queens' (Hancock 2004) among other names and stigmatizing words.

In this thesis, I will show that when the social programs of welfare became associated with African Americans, the narrative changed from America the saving grace to America the land of the handouts. This is directly related to the non-human treatment historically of Black people in this country. From slavery, Black codes, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration we see that Black folks in this country have long been treated as second-class citizens. I firmly believe that if poor whites were the only people on the welfare rolls, the demonization and criminalization of the recipients would not have happened. According to Feagin, “White-on-Black exploitation and oppression have been foundational, deeply imbedded, in our economic, political, educational, and other institutions for 400+ years—during slavery and Jim Crow (*83% of our history*) and extensive present-day discrimination. We live under a highly undemocratic U.S. Constitution (1787) substantially made, undemocratically, by elite white slave holders. This legal totalitarian system of slavery and Jim Crow oppression lasted until 1869—centuries longer than the time since it ended,” (2014). This shows the long history that is systemic racism which leads to the stigmatization of those on welfare once Black people were able to apply for various programs.

### **A Roadmap to this Thesis**

In this thesis, I am going to show this by revealing the systemic racism and social injustices that have plagued this country starting with the unfair exclusion of Black folks from these social programs that assisted so many whites in acquiring substantial today. And I will show that the narrative of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps is a myth and, in fact, not something based in reality or something that people can do to fix their economic situation. Rather, the issue of poverty and poorness is one of capitalism and is a greater issue that is not something that is the fault of the poor people themselves.

I am going to start this discussion in the second chapter where I will discuss the role that poverty and poorness plays on children—the time that the cycle of poverty usually starts. I will showcase the emotional and physical effects that poverty places on poor children and will discuss the ways that poorness negatively affects children, using the voices of poor children to highlight the emotional toll. I will also discuss the ways that the cycle of poverty perpetuates itself from the poor children to becoming poor adults who then have poor children themselves, making the cycle of poverty continue indefinitely.

In my third chapter, I will discuss the history of the welfare state in America from the 1920s when the American welfare system was implemented as a solution to World War I and was intended to help poor, white men get back into the workforce which also positively affected these white men's families (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980). I will show the history of the welfare state from the 1920s until the 1960s and the Presidency of President Johnson, to give a brief background of the welfare state for the first 40 years of its existence. I plan to do this, because, as someone who grew up poor, it would have been nice to know this information about the welfare state at a younger age to help contextualize my experience as a poor child growing up. But the information on the history of the welfare state was not something that was easily accessible to me. Thus my hope is to make it more accessible with putting the discussion in this thesis.

I will take the fourth chapter to showcase the changes in the welfare state from the 1960s onward in the era of reform for the welfare system. I will start with a discussion of President Johnson and his War on Poverty, while discussing, how it was a good idea in theory, but inherently stigmatized those who are poor and placed the poor at the forefront of the problem of poverty, ignoring the fact that capitalism places a high importance on having poor people in

order for capitalism to survive. For, you cannot have rich people if you do not have poor people, and the more you help poor people escape being poor, there is an inherent cycle that the rich people want to keep them poor so that the rich can stay rich. I will then move onto a brief discussion of Reagan and how his presidential campaign and trickle-down economic plan stigmatized poor people even further. His coming out with the term welfare queen for the first time is now the reason people imagine a lazy, Black woman with many children who lays on the couch all day getting government handouts when they think of American welfare and what welfare means. I will conclude this chapter with the discussion of President Clinton and the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act which is the biggest turning point in the American welfare system since its inception. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act changed the welfare system into the one that we are familiar with today, now twenty-three years later. Because of the negative changes that were implemented by the PRWORA, Gwendolyn Mink says, “The [PRWORA] is a moral straightjacket, conceived and enacted to disjoin rights from welfare and thus to intensify the disciplinary function of social policies affecting poor women,” (Mink [1998] 2002: 66). I plan to showcase all of these changes to the welfare state to showcase even further the stigmatization that those on welfare face because of the political rhetoric and political actions that have been taken over the past 60 years.

I will move into chapter five where I will specifically talk about the stigmatization of those on welfare today. This chapter is the culmination of my project where I want to showcase how stigmatization works for those on welfare, as well as the psychological costs that being poor and being on welfare does for individuals who are in that economic situation.

Finally, in my conclusion, I will make concluding remarks about what I learned in this process, how learning about the welfare system has affected my personal sense of self and identity, as well as offer some recommendations as to where to go with the future of the welfare system in America before leaving you with a final challenge. It is my hope in this journey that you are able to understand in a broader sense the role that welfare plays in the lives who are on it in America as well as understand more deeply the history and political changes that welfare has undergone in its existence. I hope to normalize conversations about class and economic position and hope that this thesis helps to do just that.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **VOICES OF POOR KIDS AND THE CYCLE OF POVERTY**

In 2017, the United States Census Bureau reported that 12.3% of Americans were living in poverty (Census Bureau 2018). This is an alarming statistic and provides evidence that nearly 39.7 million Americans –which includes 1 in 5 children overall, for Latinos it is one of three, for Blacks, two out of every five –are deprived daily of the basic needs for living in the richest country in the world. (Child Poverty in America 2017). According to Keilthy, “Poverty is an exhausting and endless struggle to make ends meet. It is the stress of having to choose between whether to pay the rent, the electricity bill, or pay for food. It is the daily worry about whether the car will break down or someone will get sick, and then deciding which necessity will have to be sacrificed to pay for an unexpected bill,” (2018). The thought of money is constantly within the heads of people living in poverty and is something they must grapple with alongside their other responsibilities such as caring for their children, making necessary repairs to their property, or looking for a job. These thoughts then permeate their relationships causing the children of those in poverty to have these thoughts too.

As I mentioned earlier, America has one of the highest rates of child poverty of any industrialized nation. As of 2015, 1 in 5 children were living in poverty (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017). The sheer number of children, adults, and the elderly living in poverty requires an enormous amount of support from politicians and policy makers to fix this issue. The probability of this important social issue being corrected in a timely manner is unlikely. Thus, the cycle perpetuates itself and the children living in poverty become the adults living in poverty who then have children living in poverty once again. However, as Madsen notes, “Most welfare mothers know their precarious places and wisely, question nothing,” (Madsen, as cited in

Hancock 2004: 118). These mothers question nothing because if they do, they can be put on blast and run the risk of losing their welfare benefits (Mink [1998] 2002) and it has been shown time and time again that when welfare mothers do question or make noise about their precarious economic situation, the policymakers do not do anything about it (Hancock 2004). So, rather than questioning, these mothers simply obey the rules and hope for the best which in turn affects their children who are also a part of this cycle of welfare and poverty.

It is a disastrous cycle and because we are in a capitalist context, there are money hungry people that have power that want to keep their power. As Iceland notes, “Income inequality results from economic systems that foster the accumulation of money and assets in one segment of society, often at the expense of another,” (2013: 82). This showcases the cycle that is poverty. Once there is a group of people who are working for another group of people and are being kept as an asset to another group in society, the group in power wishes to maintain that power and keep the other group below them. Those who are not in power then have a much harder life and bring their life home with them.

Children living in poverty have to grow up so much more quickly than their peers because of how money dominates our circles of life as shown above. Children have to think about how their parents are going to pay their bills, if their parents are going to be able to find a job, and whether or not there will be enough food on the table for everyone to eat, all the while remaining a child, doing well in school, and navigating social circles where children do not necessarily understand class difference, as witnessed by the experiences I shared in chapter one. Kayleigh, who is sixteen, states, “Money is the main priority, I always worry about it,” (BBC 2011). Children who are poor are constantly forced to grapple with issues surrounding money.

Throughout this chapter, I wish to allow for the voices of children in poverty, like Kayleigh's, to be heard and for there to be the discussion of issues that poor children are facing.

## **Hunger**

Hunger is something that is a constant worry for those in poverty, especially the children living in poverty. According to the BBC, "One in five low income families report skipping meals, and children living with single parent families are twice as likely to go without," (BBC 2011). These children have to make sacrifices because they know that they are not going to get food three meals a day but rather must choose which meals to eat and attempt to snag extra food at school if they can. Courtney, who is eight, says, "'I'll get [lunch] when I'm at school but when I'm at home I'll sometimes have to go without [lunch]," (BBC 2011), showing that food is not something to be taken for granted.

Because food is not something to be taken for granted, children who are living in poverty often must bargain with themselves until there is another meal on the table. For example, ten-year-old Kayleigh says,

"I'm just starving. We don't get that three meals a day, like, breakfast, lunch and then dinner. When I feel just, like, hungry, I'll just, like, I'll feel, like— like I'm so, like, sad and all droopy, and then I'll be feeling, like, weak, and then, some in the mornings I'll be, like, so starving, but then I'll, like, be, like, Oh, I need some food, but then, like, I'll get, like— but then I don't think of food, and then I'll just think of something else and then I'll not be hungry anymore," (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017).

She tries to put her mind on other things so that she doesn't think of her hunger or the starvation that she experiences daily.

Similarly, Sam, who is eleven, says, "Until dad has a job, we don't have any money. And sometimes I don't even get lunch. But then I go, yeah, I'm not even hungry. I'll live. So, I save up my hunger so when dinner comes, I'll have eaten it all," (BBC 2011). Sam, unlike

Kaylie, lies to himself so that he can believe that he isn't actually hungry, to put it out of his mind until dinner comes.

Tyler, age 12, demonstrates the sacrifices he must make in the kitchen when deciding what to eat on any given day. "There's good days and bad days. Sometimes when we have cereal, we don't have milk. We have to eat it dry. Sometimes we don't have cereal and we have milk," (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017). Tyler showcases the food inconsistency in the kitchen cabinets; he is never fully certain what he might find in the kitchen and whether it is going to be something that he wants, rather he has to make do with what is there. This is something that kids who are not food secure do not have to deal with.

Similarly, nine-year-old Brittany shows that she makes sacrifices even though her body tells her something differently. She says, "My favorite food is Chinese food. I am craving that right now. You know what makes me mad? We can't afford it," (Neumann and Mucciolo 2012), thus demonstrating that children in poverty have to make sacrifices that other children do not—namely: cravings.

Children in poverty are forced to deal with issues surrounding food on an hourly basis. It is not as simple as hearing their stomach growl and opening the kitchen cabinet door to find their favorite snack to silence the rumble until their next meal. Rather, these children must silence their growl by thinking of other times when food was available or by distracting themselves all together. They do not have the luxury of craving a hamburger from McDonalds and then seeing it appear on their dinner plate that evening—they're lucky if they find something on their plate that they have had a craving for at all, or having a meal that actually fills them up entirely. Because of the way they are forced to understand hunger, these children grow up at a very quick rate.

## Living Conditions

Hunger occupies the minds of food insecure kids often. But their living conditions are something that they must physically face on a daily basis; they cannot hide where they live and often times cannot have friends over because of their living conditions. This is an emotional and psychological cost that does not often get discussed.

The living conditions for those who are living in poverty are appalling. Not only do youth who are living in poverty have to deal with the lack of food on the table, but they also have to live in dwellings that are not up to code or they live in homeless shelters, or they live in a motel as temporary housing. As Ludwig notes in a 2003 article, “In 1990 approximately 8 million Americans were living in high-poverty neighborhoods, almost double the number in 1970,” (136). Because poor kids are living with other poor kids, they do not have the same ability to get out of the poor neighborhood nor do they have the same opportunities as other children who live in non-poor neighborhoods. These issues of housing do not go unrecognized by the children living in them, either.

Paige, age 10, lives in a high-rise apartment where the windows are not entirely sealed in. She notices the dampness in her room and the issues that the dampness creates. She says,

“I can’t sleep up my top bunk because sometimes the dampness spreads all over the wall. And I’m laying like that and it will go in my chest. So I can’t sleep up on my top bunk even though other kids really like to sleep up on their top bunk I can’t. And it’s really disgusting. I mean no wonder your mom and your dad feel sick and all that all the time and I feel sick it’s because the other day I felt really sick and I really wanted to go to hospital. I was telling my mom I wanted to go to the hospital because this house is so bad. So, it’s just it’s ridiculous,” (BBC 2011).

Paige’s ability to recognize how disgusting her house is, the fact that there is not anything she can do about it, and the sadness she expresses when talking about her room, is, unfortunately, not unfamiliar for children living in poverty (Reese 2005). She also wishes she could paint her walls

or put up wallpaper, but realizes that she cannot because it is all just a waste of money, (BBC 2011).

Sometimes, too, families living in poverty are no longer able to afford the house that they have lived in for some number of years. This creates an emotional distress for the children living in poverty because they have to up and move their entire lives across town—sometimes even moving cities away—to ensure that they are still able to have a roof over their heads. According to Sarah Godfrey, “The emotional impact of moving is in the top five most stressful situations [people] experience across a lifespan... People develop attachments to their houses and communities that can be as strong as the relationships with their families,” (Godfrey 2016). The impact is a huge deal for children who have spent their childhood working and growing up in a certain place or neighborhood, too. Nine-year-old Kaylie says, “I don’t want to move. I like living here because my friends are nice to me. Like, I want to just stay put here,” (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017). It is an emotionally taxing experience for children to lose their friends and the familiarity of their surrounding neighborhood when they are required to move because of financial insecurity. But, it happens all the time.

But sometimes, when families move, they do not move to another house, but rather to a Motel. And while *The Suite Life of Zach and Cody*, as seen on Disney Channel, may make living in a hotel seem cool, those who actually live in the motels in Disneyland’s shadows have quite the different experience.

For example, the Brewster Family live in a motel in Orange County. There are a total of five Brewster children, their widowed mother, and their five dogs all in the same motel room. Allie Brewster, who is sixteen, discusses the lack of privacy in the small, four-walled motel room. She says, “We have to live in the same room, deal with each other. There's no walls

besides the four walls we all share. We don't have walls to run away to. The bathroom is, like, the only sense of security,” (Pelosi 2010). The lack of privacy is something that many poor children are familiar with, often lacking their own space. This is echoed by Allie’s eleven-year-old, Zach Brewster. He says, “You get no privacy. Every time you want to watch something, they are always in the way. Every time you want to lay down you always have a dog with you,” (Pelosi 2010). This is further shown by two boys who live in a different motel room—Dylan and Ben. Dylan and Ben share the top bunk of a bunk bed in the motel so that their mother can sleep in the bottom bunk. They do not enjoy it because they are 9 and 10 respectively and do not have the amount of space needed for two boys of their age and size to properly sleep, (Pelosi 2010).

But the lack of privacy is not the only thing that living in the motel means for these children. They also have to deal with general dirtiness and unclean living spaces. For eleven-year-old Brenda, these experiences come in the form of bed bugs. She says, “My bed has bed bugs. One of them does. [And the itching is] really bad,” (Pelosi 2010). This is something that poor children have to face and add an unnecessary amount of stress onto their already stressful lives.

### **What They Do For Fun**

As opposed to hunger and housing, two necessities for life, children are still children after all, and have wishes to be kids and not have to worry about their economic situation all of the time. So even when children are poor they are responsible for living a childhood and making time to have some fun, too. However, the fun that poor children can have is vastly different than the fun that children from higher socioeconomic statuses can have. In fact, “Poor kids are five times less likely to have access to a safe outdoor play space than rich kids,” (BBC 2011). Because poor kids do not have access to a safe space outdoors, they are limited by the number of

things they can do. And because their outdoor play space is not a safe one, poor kids are exposed to more dangerous behavior and experiences from a younger age than non-poor kids who have access to safer alternatives.

These dangerous outdoor experiences are shown by ten-year-old Paige in particular. She discusses her typical outdoor playtime with friends and recounts an experience she had earlier in the week. She says, “The other day, me and my friends, found needles [at the playground] ...and a big bag of them. It’s not very nice to see that...where we have to play. It’s not very nice,” (BBC 2011). By finding needles on the ground, Paige has to deal with dangerous issues surrounding drug usage invading her play space.

And it is not like poor children do not like to have fun. They simply just cannot afford to have the same kind of fun as their wealthier counterparts. For example, ten-year-old Kaylie and her friend, Jordan, go canning for fun. They look for non-squished aluminum cans to help make money. If they are lucky enough to find non-squished cans, they receive 5 cents for each can. Kaylie discusses this reasoning behind going canning by saying, “My mom, she has very little in her bank. And like, she can’t pay all of her bills at the same time,” (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017). The fact that these children have to give up their time and energy to help their parents afford things needed to live is such an added emotional cost for children. This is explained by twelve-year-old Tyler who says, “A lot of times, I have to give my money up to buy groceries and buy gas for the car and lawn mower, for mowing other people’s lawns and— I got \$10 and I put in 6 of it for the gas and gave the rest to my mom for some food, and it’s kind of what I do with my money. I don’t think I’m going to do mowing for a living,” (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017). This shows the amount of work that must be done so that the poor children feel like they

are contributing to and helping their parents out financially—something that non-poor kids do not have to do.

And if the financial and emotional cost is not enough of a reason to keep children from having a “normal” childhood, then there is the worry that if they have too much fun, they might be kicked out of their current living establishment. This is shown by nine-year-old Dylan who lives in a motel in Orange County. He says,

“We try to keep it as quiet as we can. We are just trying to have fun. We're just kids. The old woman, that we call the wicked witch, might yell. So we've got to go downstairs because my sister is making too much noise and we don't want the old woman who we call the wicked witch to call downstairs. That's why.... We can't play because my dad doesn't want her to call. So we could get kicked out,” (Pelosi 2010).

The stress that is experienced by Dylan and his brother for just “being kids” is so high that they could literally be homeless if they are not careful. This situation is unique to the poor children experience because children from higher classes do not have the same threat of homelessness being held over their heads when they are “just being kids”.

### **Pets**

Because the living situation is so unique, poor kids cannot often have pets, even though pets are an important part of many children’s lives. And while it may seem insignificant, pets play an important role in the lives of the poor, too. According to the Humane Society, “there are 19 million pets living with U.S. families whose income level is below the poverty line,” (Arrington and Markarian). This means that people who are already making sacrifices in terms of their mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing are now having to include their pets in this, too. This is noted by the Brewster family who lives in the motel. While all six of the humans are already sharing a very cramped space, they still make room for the five dogs, too, thus showcasing how important the dogs are to the family and the morale. They must also use their

own money to pay for the dogs care, food, and well being. If it was easy to cut that out, they would, but clearly poor and non-poor families alike love and care about their dogs and value them as part of their lives.

However, not all children are lucky enough to get to keep their pets while they are poor. This is shown by Kaylie. When nine-year-old Kaylie was moving from the place where she currently lived to the new residence, she was told that she would have to give up her dog, Nala. She said,

“We won’t get to keep our dog Nala. It’s extra money, and we’re going to get rid of her. Like, I want to spend as much time with her, but then again, I want to spend time with my friends.... Nala, she was, like, my dog. Like, she was, like, my favorite dog. And now we have to take her to the pound. We have to get rid of Nala but not Tanner [my newborn baby brother]. Nala’s so adorable. Like, if you if you had her, she would sleep on your bed and she would sleep on you. She’s, like, your little guard dog. We’re getting rid of my perfect little, lovey dog. Yes, Nala I hear you stressing out. I love you, Nala,” (Neumann and Mucciolo 2012).

The loss of the pet for Kaylie is a big stressor and is not something that children who come from money have to deal with, unless, of course, the family dog dies. In the documentary, Kaylie breaks down and cries when talking about how she has to give up Nala. She is very, very emotional and must learn how to cope with her emotions when discussing such a unique experience. She was also told that she would not be allowed to keep Nala’s collar (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017) which is another emotional piece of the documentary. I do not think that many people think about pets and the emotional costs of living with pets when people think of those in poverty, but in fact, it is a big issue that many people must deal with.

### **Mental Health Crises**

Finally, a hidden cost of being poor comes in the form of mental healthcare. Kids who are in poverty are constantly stigmatized because of their financial status. From the clothes they wear to not having the latest technology to having poor physical health, children living in

poverty are constantly being looked at and stigmatized by their classmates, people on the street, or really anyone that they might interact with on a daily basis. Similarly to how adults are blamed for their impoverished “lifestyle”, the children of the poor are often viewed sympathetically because, while it is not their fault that they are poor, they cannot escape it and often receive pity and, in turn, are stigmatized.

There is a sense of embarrassment that comes from being poor and being a kid. As Jasmine, who is nine-years-old says, “I’m embarrassed because I’m poor and because I live in a shelter. It makes me feel like I just wish I never lived here,” (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017). Jasmine wishes she could change her situation because she does not like the shelter where she lives; she would rather not live there. If she did not live there, her sense of embarrassment would not exist, at least in terms of her living arrangement. Echoing that, is Rudee, age six, who lives at a Motel in Orange County, California. Rudee says, “The first place where I ever slept in is the bushes. It was like -- it was kind of embarrassing because they had people looking at us,” (Pelosi 2010). Because Rudee and family are homeless, Rudee felt stared at and embarrassed because of the living situation. And rightfully so. No one should have to live in the bushes for any amount of time.

Jealousy is also an issue for children who are poor because they see their peers going and doing things that they cannot do. This is witnessed by eight-year-old Courtney who says, “I get jealous whenever people go on holiday and we can’t afford it,” (BBC 2011). Courtney understands that her mother does not have the financial ability to take her and her two sisters on vacation, but still wishes it was something she could do because her schoolmates go on vacation on a regular basis often coming back with cool and unique stories to share. It’s also shown by Paige who, shown previously, just wants to be able to sleep on the top bunk of her bed because

that is what her friends like to do, but she cannot because of the dampness that has spread to her top bunk.

Taking vacation out of the equation, Jasmine is jealous of people who walk into their own house. She says, “Sometimes when I watch people who, like, walk into their house when we’re driving, I wish that sometimes, like, I had a house like those people,” (Neumann and Mucciolo 2012). Jasmine just wants what she sees other people have—a house that she can call her own where she can live without being in a shelter.

While embarrassment and jealousy are big issues for children living in poverty, the next step up is issues relating to self-esteem. Kayleigh, who is sixteen, says, “[Being poor] puts you in that mindset that oh, I’m lower than everyone else, which lowers your self-esteem to start with... You have such low self-esteem that sometimes you end up hurting yourself,” (BBC 2011). Kayleigh’s self-esteem was so low that she ended up trying to take her life not once, not twice, but three times before the age of sixteen (BBC 2011). She says, “I did try and take my own life when I was younger. I was thinking things along the lines that I’m not worthy enough to be here, um nobody wants me here, I’m better off dead, things like that,” (BBC 2011).

But Kayleigh is not alone. 1 in 6 youth living in poverty have considered suicide at some point in their lives (BBC 2011). This statistic is simply atrocious. We have the most vulnerable youth attempting—and sometimes succeeding—to take their own lives because of the financial insecurity and the guilt and shame that are associated with being poor.

### **Wisdom Beyond Their Years**

All of these situations of poor children are to say that they have wisdom beyond their years. They often put thoughts of their siblings, their parents, or their pets before they think of themselves. Ten-year-old Kaylie thinks of all the awful things that might happen if her mom and

dad cannot afford to pay the bills. She says, “When we can’t afford to pay our bills, like, our house bills and stuff, I’m afraid, like, we’ll get homeless. Me and my brother will starve. You never know what’ll happen in your life, so yeah,” (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017). As you can see, Kaylie’s mental capacity is taken over by what she knows to be something of an issue for her family. She worries a lot about finances and wishes to figure out ways to help her family out.

But because of the hard times these children have faced, they recognize that this is not the life they want for themselves in the future. They want to escape poverty and live in better situations. Take, sixteen-year-old Jasmine, for example. She says, “I wouldn’t choose this life but it’s kind of showing me what can happen. I will take this experience and use it to make myself a better person by learning from it and knowing what not to do. My hope for the future would be to have a house with my own room and my own space but you can’t really have everything you want,” (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017). She is going to take the experience of being poor and grow from it so that she does not end in the same financial situation as she has been living in so far. At least, that is what she hopes to do.

Thirteen-year-old Johnny also recognizes his need to escape poverty. He sees the only way out as his grades. He says,

“Grades is my only way out of here. If my grades are not good, I know I can’t go to universities like my dream is to go. I know if my grades are not good, I can’t play football like I want to. If I don’t succeed doing what I have to do in school and making good grades, I will fail. I’m going to live this life, of shelters, going through hard times, can’t feed my kids, trying to figure out where I’m going to lay my head every night,” (Neumann and Mucciolo 2017).

That is the only way out for a lot of poor children—education. However, the school system is also not adept at dealing with poor children. In fact, “Some maintain that teachers and administrators, even those in the most disadvantaged schools, are justified in believing that they

cannot have much of an effect on the lives of the poorest children because of what happens outside the school and what has occurred before these youngsters are old enough even to attend school,” (Lewis 1996). This is important because the teachers are the first line of defense for poor children. Education is the way out of poverty. But, if it is believed that poor kids are already “too helpless” for the teachers, there really is no hope for poor kids to break the cycle of poverty, because they are not getting the support that they need.

This cycle is something that needs to be broken. Something that we all need to step up and listen to. With various levels of welfare reform politicians have argued, “that children should not have to pay for their mothers’ sins, that welfare reform should ‘be tough on parents, not tough on kids,’” (Mink [1998] 2002:4). But this tough on parents, not on kids’ discourse is completely ridiculous. As you can see just from the voices of children—and some parents—in this chapter, any kind of sanctions imposed on poor mothers negatively affects the children who are living on welfare, too.

I hope by sharing these stories, you can get a sense of those who are actually living in poverty and how it affects their individual lives. Children in poverty are often not given as much agency as they deserve nor are their own issues with poverty often talked about, rather, they are discussed in relationship to their parents and their parents’ financial statuses. I hope that in this chapter that you understand the emotional taxation and growth that children living in poverty are dealing with and that you take the words of these children with you throughout the rest of this thesis. I also hope you can think about how stigmatizing poor people in general is not a good thing, but specifically when thinking about poor children and the emotional effects poverty and the stigma associated with poverty has on them.

Stepping away from specifically dealing with children in poverty, next, I will be discussing the history of the welfare “state” in America from its inception until the 1960s. I will highlight how the system that was used was utilized to benefit poor, white men and was the system that we think of today which incorporates many stereotypes of poor, Black women and their truckloads of children.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WELFARE SYSTEM IN AMERICA**

Just because one is poor does not mean that they are on welfare. The stories I have highlighted from the voices of children in poverty do not mean that they are on welfare, but rather that they are poor and may be on welfare. However, in America, we do have a welfare system that is branded as a system meant to helping those who are poor or in need. Before writing this thesis, I had no idea what the history of the welfare system was in America nor how it came to be. Throughout this chapter, I plan to give an overview of the welfare system from its' beginnings to what it was before welfare reform happened, beginning in the 1960s. In this chapter, I plan to take you on a journey of the welfare system that is not normally discussed. I want to break the common misconceptions about the welfare system and give a bit more background on the history of the system itself. Because, those who utilize social welfare programs today like Food Stamps, Public Housing, or Medicaid are looked down—and stigmatized—because of their social standing and are being blamed for causing their own bad luck of economic insecurity. They are further stigmatized because many people tend to blame them for their economic insecurity and then criticize them for looking for and resorting to “government handouts” to help cure their economic woes. But that is not how the welfare system started in America; that is just the stereotype that welfare recipients face on today.

Currently, there are two views on why people need social welfare: “One blames the economic system; the other blames the poor,” (Mandell 1975:4), which is both problematic because it is not as simple as that. If people are to blame the economic system for the reason that there are people who need assistance, that person is simply forgetting to include the differences and intersections of identities that make up various privileges and thus give some more

opportunity than others; if one blames the poor, then one is failing to recognize the problems that the capitalistic society in which we live fails individuals on a regular basis. It is my claim, here, that we need to look at society as a whole as to why people are in need of assistance. Also, I think it fair to assume that in any society, people, at various times throughout their lives, are going to need assistance (granted, maybe not the top 10%, but certainly anyone who falls in the middle class or lower). The time your car engine backfires on you is an unexpected experience that is going to absorb some of the “free money” you may have set aside for those experiences (of course, in our society, many people do not have enough money for food, let alone ‘free’ money to be able to pay for unexpected costs). But in this society, our society, there is such a stigma surrounding those on welfare because of a basic right that many people may need to survive. The more problematic view of the two, of course, are the people who blame the poor for their economic situation.

In this chapter, I want to make clear that the history of social welfare programs in American history dates back to the 1920s and actually was first meant to help white, men in American society. According to Goffman, “the central issue of [minority] groups is their place in the social structure; the contingencies these persons encounter in face-to-face interaction is only part of the problem, and something that cannot itself be fully understood without reference to the history, the political development, and the current policies of the group,” (Goffman 1963: 127). That’s why in this thesis, I wish to give a historical background of the welfare state to be able to discuss the social understanding that is the welfare system.

### **The 1920s and the Beginning of the Welfare System**

“The term ‘welfare’ had a positive connotation when it first came into use in the early twentieth century because it differentiated old relief practices from the newly instituted social

programs. Katz notes that it is not clear when the term acquired its contemporary stigma,” (Lawinski 2010:23). One of the first federalized programs was the International Association of Industrial Accident Boards and Commissions (IAIABC) 1913 which “provided state workers’ compensation officials with a forum to spread their rehabilitation ideas and to lobby for public funds for rehabilitation,” (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980: 64). But this public welfare program was only going to be available for those who were working in federal and state run facilities. Thus, those either not working or those not seen as workers did not have access to this program. Therefore, only white people were eligible for this welfare program, something that is normally looked down upon today, but was rather seen as a good thing back in 1913.

As we entered the 1920s, and the Roaring Twenties were taking off in American society, it was important to those in charge that productivity was key in anything related to America. For, Henry Ford created the conveyor belt in 1913 and productivity having been revolutionized, various political leaders wanted to ensure that productivity was achieved in all aspects of American society. So, in September of 1921, President Warren G. Harding convened a conference on unemployment, the largest conference in American history. Harding, a former engineer, believed that unemployment was a direct waste of industrial function. This conference aimed at making sure producers were on the same page so that production would be as efficient as it could be (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980:61).

This move showed that there was going to be a lot of reliance on state control to centralize information of jobs as well as take on the role of making social projects when unemployment rose in their area (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980:61). This was good for the poor, white men who were living in the areas where there were resources, but did not mean a thing for those people in rural communities, nor did it positively affect women who were not allowed to

work nor did it offer Black men the opportunity to have access to the data. This was 1921, so exists very strong racial tension, having the Red Summer of 1919 happen just two years prior.

Following the work for white, straight (or seemingly straight) men, became a welfare program for white mothers and infants. This act, The Sheppard-Towner Act, enacted in the late 1920s, was the first federal welfare program to focus on infants and mothers. All other welfare efforts were for the industrially disabled, for veterans, or for other wartime efforts. The Sheppard-Towner Act's aim, however, was designed to decrease infant and maternal mortality, (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980: 65). This was the first program aimed at women, at all. Thus showing how important women and other marginalized groups were to American political concerns. But, this was only for white women, of course. Women of color and other marginalized groups had a very long way to go before they were granted any kind of protection or help from the federal government. I mean, at this point, women and other Black folks were not even viewed as full persons, yet. Much less did they have access to government programs.

This is further supported because the federal welfare programs of the 1920s were only utilized to showcase the efficacy of such programs. The programs were not guaranteed to all people who were eligible nor did the federal welfare programs promise to continue providing protection against life's hazards, (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980: 66). This is not the way to handle welfare programs, in my opinion. As I've said, it is a Human Right to be able to eat a healthy amount of food as well as provide shelter for one's self and one's family. The minute that someone is unable to do that is when the government should be required to step in and ensure that those basic Human Rights are being met. The federal welfare programs of the 1920s was much more of a 'look what America can do for its people' as opposed to having the best interests of its' people at heart.

## The Great Depression

This was the welfare state in America until a turn of events caused the Great Depression to take over everyone's lives and change the route for American history and American living for good. The Great Depression (and solutions to the *temporary* problem of the Depression) is the birth of the welfare state in America. "The Depression wiped out much of the ideological basis for the social welfare system in the New Era," (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980: 73) and caused a social, political, and economic upheaval in American society. "The once-splendid cost-benefit demonstrations undertaken by federal and state bureaucrats would now, in depressed economic circumstances, show that the cost of educating, rehabilitating, or medically treating welfare clients far outweighed the benefits that these clients could return to society by their participation in the industrial marketplace," (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980: 73). This quick turnaround showcases how those in power looked down on the poor and as soon as something was to go wrong, they were the first group of people looked at to no longer deserve human rights. Granted, in this day and age, it was only the white people on welfare that were regarded as no *longer* being allowed to have the rights of the welfare system; Black individuals weren't even seen as people in the 1920s. But still, this is the beginning of the stigmatization of the poor and the blame and inadequacy that they are often referred to have when being on welfare today.

However, in 1935, just over halfway through the Great Depression, the Social Security Act was enacted and was thus the beginning of social welfare programs that we are more familiar with today, however these programs were meant for and utilized only by the white population. In fact, the Social Security Act is seen as the beginning of social assistance for it, "provided assistance for those categories of people whom legislators assumed to be outside the labor market: children, the aged, the disabled, and the blind," (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:23). As you

can see, this is the first time that those who cannot work and should not work for various reasons are granted the same rights as those who can work. This is revolutionary in terms of caring for all, and not just for some. But again, this care for all was only for American white people.

However, the social security act was also a bit stigmatizing. According to Goffman, “The Social Security Act of 1935 in American ensures that almost every employee will have a unique registration number to which can be affixed a lifelong record of employment, a scheme of identification which has already worked considerable hardship on our criminal classes,” (Goffman 1963: 57). Because every employee has this unique number, those who are not working or have criminal convictions today, are further stigmatized because they do not have a history of work associated with their social security number nor will they have the benefits of social security insurance once they reach retirement age because of the stigmatization associated with them and their social security number.

### **A Permanent Fixture in Society**

But these public assistance programs were originally meant to be temporary relief for those who needed it. However, as they continued and more and more people were gaining access to the programs, it became clear that these welfare programs were going to be a permanent fixture in American society. Berkowitz and McQuaid point out that, “Public Assistance, however, failed to follow the path that welfare experts hoped it would lead down. Rising divorce rates and massive migrations of rural populations to central cities began to pose new types of welfare dilemmas... [which showed] that public assistance programs [began to be seen] as a permanent necessary ‘second line of defense’ against life’s hardships,” (1980: 138). And while this may have been seen as a bad thing at the time, I believe it is a fundamental right that those who are living in a society have a right that their government helps to protect them

from life's hardships no matter how long or how short the help may be needed. However, part of the stigma surrounding welfare programs comes from this discourse that shows the unhappiness of the permanence of the programs. Because it was seen as a negative that these programs were becoming permanent, society began associating those who were participating in the programs as negatives aspects of society, too, and that had devastating effects for welfare recipients all the way around.

After the Social Security Act granted the right to welfare to those who literally and physically cannot work, came the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of 1935 which became the central agency dealing with relief of the Depression for those who were not disabled, too old, or too young to work. The goal of the administration was to relieve 3.5 million individuals from unemployment and put them back to work. But, this left another still 10 million unemployed (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:25). By putting people to work, it was believed that it would create a snowball effect that would then trickle to everyone else and all other aspects of society (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:25). Of course, as we have since learned, snowballing and "trickling" does not address problems of income disparity and wealth properly. In fact, it often times leaves people in a bad situation, sometimes a worse situation than with what they started with. Often times, too, those who are targeted to be the "first responders" to the situation and are the ones to start the trickling process become better off and leave everyone else behind. For example, in this case, those who were granted work were mostly white men. This meant that the white men were gaining skills and experience necessary to the job market and would eventually be able to find work. Those other 10 million who were left behind were not gaining those skills and the economy was not snowballing into their favor which thus left them in a worse situation because

now there existed people with skills that they did not have before which means they are going to be able to get higher paying jobs and live more comfortable lives.

But, also, this created a more competitive market and required those who were able to gain skills and advance their abilities to a level that no one around them had (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:25). This created a terrible snowball effect, because the people that were gaining the skills necessary to become skilled workers were predominately white men. Therefore, when the Depression era was ending and more people were getting jobs, women, and Black people were being left in the dust. Thus, creating a strong division of labor. This division of labor simply separates individuals in the same society into various social groups and is a staunch cause of tension between individuals both within and outside of that social group. Durkheim says, “This tension in social relationships is due in part to the fact that the working classes do not really desire the status assigned to them and too often accept it only under constraint and force, not having any means of gaining any other status,” (Durkheim, 199). The same goes for those who are on welfare. Those who are on welfare do not want to accept the status that they are given, but rather they must in order to meet with the demands of society. This is just the beginning of the welfare system. This part of the system, however, was to help white men in positive ways. As I will continue to discuss, you will see the advancement of welfare to today’s system, one that is very stigmatized, which is where Durkheim’s division of labor is even more apparent.

Even though it seems pretty obvious, it is important to note that the Works Progress Administration preserved the status quo of Black folks in America. Allen points out that, “Black unemployment was double that of white [people] in 1933,” (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:30). Because it was more than double, there were fewer jobs for Black folks and they weren’t being hired. This is represented in a Letter sent to the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*,

“Only few line to ask you to do something for us down hear in Plaquemines Parish. We have report to the E.R.A. and they dont give us any work and dont gave us relif to the colored people. so kindly got in tutch with Washington. See why they dont gave us work and done wont to give relif down hear in Plaquemines Parish. Miss Marjorie Rickey is Parshin Director. Bad place to recave mail. No work to make a living, no money to leave. this will all bee all for today kindly do this favor for us from,” (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975: 30, quoted and spelled directly from the source).

As you can see, Black individuals knew what was going on, but simply did not have the resources or support they needed to change their economic and social position.

This discrimination is made further obvious when looking at the Tennessee Valley Authority, noted as the most progressive of all the social welfare programs. However, Black people are either, “systematically excluded or discreetly overlooked,” (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:30) in almost every program in the TVA. In fact, skilled jobs were going to white workers while unskilled jobs were going to Black men (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:30). This further disenfranchises Black men because while the white men and the Black men have the same socio-economic standard of living, because of the color of their skin, the Black individuals are being left out and their white counterparts are gaining more and more skills that further separate the two groups. Also, by giving Black men unskilled labor, and the white men skilled labor, the Black men are being stigmatized and basically are being told that they are only as good as their work—which is unskilled and less important than the skilled labor. It does not come as a shock that the Black men are being discriminated against, but it does put it into perspective when looking at social welfare programs for ALL and seeing how some are being excluded. In fact, “As one historian writes, the New Deal failed to solve the problem of depressions, it failed to raise the impoverished, it failed to redistribute income, it failed to extend equality and generally countenanced racial discrimination and segregation,” (Allen, ed. Mandell, 1975:31).

The WPA was terminated in 1943 and did not leave behind a job creation plan (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:31), which meant that the people who were still unemployed by the end of the Depression (predominately Black folks) were still unemployed, and the white men that had developed skills, were developing new skills and were able to pass those skills onto their children.

Because of the post-war capitalist revival, we have the welfare state that we know today, of sorts, (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980: 136). In fact, in 1954, President Eisenhower presented programs to Congress in a series of special messages that emphasized rehabilitation as the key to all social welfare ills (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980: 147). At this point, rehabilitation was to be for those who were seen as sick and not fully functioning members of society. And while Eisenhower was attempting to “fix” the societal problem, he, in fact, not doing that and creating more stigma for those who are not working. For, rehabilitation implies that people have fallen out of the scope of normal life or ability. Therefore, the only people that can be “rehabilitated” in this society are white people who are no longer working for whatever reason. Black individuals cannot be *re*-habilitated because not working was their norm, not by choice, of course, but rather by the social problems and social issues that were presented to them. Therefore, rehabilitation for Black folks would be to reinforce their non-working and staying out of the society eye.

As you can see, welfare did not originate for the poor, Black women to be targeted as non-functioning, lazy members of society. Instead, the welfare system was created to protect white men, their livelihoods, and their families. As the welfare programs progressed, and African-Americans gained access to the welfare programs, did it become the stigmatized and looked down upon system that it is today.

In the next chapter, I will be discussing how welfare “reform” has taken place in terms of the War on Poverty, Reagannomics, and the Welfare Reform of 1996. I will showcase how the reform of welfare policies has actually failed those who need welfare and the reform perpetuates and allows for the stigmatization of those on welfare and living in poverty to occur.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **THE DISASTORIOUS EFFECTS REFORM HAD FOR THOSE ON WELFARE**

While there has been a lot of talk about welfare so far, the question that now needs to be answered is when did the welfare system that we know today come into play? When I say welfare system, I mean the system of oppression, stigmatization, and downright misconceptions about those on welfare become relevant to the discussion of those on welfare? Because as discussed in chapter three, so far the welfare system that I have been describing has been a system that has attempted to benefit the white man and has yet to deal with any woman or person of color.

The answer, while not simple, can be seen in three defining moments in terms of the welfare timeline: The War on Poverty which began in the 1960s in the Era of President Johnson, the Reagan Era Administration and his failed “trickle-down” economics, and the biggest turn for welfare, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 as instituted by President Clinton, all three being acts of welfare reform. I will take this chapter to describe how each of these three moments in the welfare timeline contributed to the welfare state which we are familiar with today as well as how stigmatization came to be a big player in terms of those on welfare, to be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Firstly, I would like to note that welfare reform was supposed to be a good thing, but when listening to the voices of those that welfare reformed affected, it is clear that it is not. According to an anonymous welfare mother, “Welfare reform is supposed to help people, but instead it is causing me hardship... Welfare reform is nothing more than reducing caseloads, cutting people off [of] welfare, pushing us into greater poverty,” (Reese 2005: 3). I would like

for you to take this quote of an anonymous mother with you as you go throughout this chapter so that you can keep the voices of those who welfare reform affects at the forefront of your mind.

### **The War on Poverty and President Johnson**

During his first State of the Union Address in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared a War on Poverty. In his address, he declared the war to be unconventional and “not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, prevent it,” (Bailey and Danziger 2013: 1). It is clear that President Johnson was trying to make his presence known and to have a lasting impact on American society given the circumstances of his Presidency at this time—this was before his reelection and was the first State of the Union address given after the assassination of President Kennedy. However, I think his War on Poverty, while it had good intentions, was sorely misguided.

Because of the welfare system operating in the way that it did before President Johnson—or Kennedy for that matter—came into office, Johnson had a lot to handle in terms the disenfranchised Black folks who knew there was money available to assist with people living in poverty, but not having access to it. According to Allen, “The rhetoric of the New Frontier, Great Society, and War on Poverty was crucial for both Kennedy and Johnson to secure the Black vote and to curb potential or actual urban unrest,” (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:33). If Johnson did not address poverty in a nationwide way, there would have been much unrest surrounding the issue of poverty and class.

Firstly, while living in a capitalistic society, there will there will always be poor people who cannot afford things, for that is the nature of capitalism; without poor people, capitalism cannot exist. In fact, “The very idea of unbridled capitalism reinforces the notion that some are meant to be poor and some are meant to be rich (Freeman, et.al. 2011: 179). This is because a

capitalist economy is based on those who are in financial power getting power and those who are not, being forced to stay at the bottom.

Instead of taking a War on Poverty, Johnson should have declared a war on capitalism so that the true forces of society that were (and continue to be) at fault were forced to be held accountable and actual change could have occurred. By declaring a war on poverty, President Johnson inadvertently stigmatized poor people because he claimed that their way of living and their financial situation (though entirely not their fault) was something to be seen as less than and something that needed to be combatted. By declaring a figurative war, President Johnson inherently positioned poor people against those from higher economic statuses.

In terms of his idea of preventing poverty, his main claim was to provide every elderly person, regardless of income level, the access to Medicaid. He said that by giving elderly people who can no longer work access to financial security for medical costs, it provided some sense of security for the elderly, but also, would trickle down to the children of the elderly because it would help them from having to suffer economic setbacks in terms of taking care of their parents and the medical bills they incur (Bailey & Danziger 2013: 8). This is a nice idea in theory, but in the society in which we live—a racist and capitalist one—it does not work. For in terms of capitalism, once “everyone” has health insurance, the hospitals, medical professionals, and insurance companies (all of which work together) raise the prices of their services so that everyone must pay more to contribute to the health insurance scam. This allows the rich people, in charge of the hospitals and insurance companies to get richer while suppressing many individuals.

Johnson’s idea of prevention is rooted in a very white, optimistic view of society. By saying that affording everyone Medicaid would be the beginning of the prevention of the cycle

of poverty, President Johnson sorely forgot that Black folks were not even allowed to attend many doctors at this time; they were not considered full humans by a large number of people in society. So, this notion of prevention of poverty was very white-centric and an ableist mindset to have.

This leads directly to the notion that the War on Poverty is intertwined with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The War on Poverty pushed for desegregation. In fact, the Johnson Administration withheld federal funds in cases where local and state organizations failed to desegregate (Bailey & Danziger 2013: 3). This is the first time that there was an actual statement that recognized the number of poor Black people and there was an acknowledgement of the racist tendencies of various organizations. There was finally a call for action as supported by the President and his administration. Some scholars claim the Civil Rights Act and War on Poverty are distinctly different but the 1964 State of the Union and Economic Report were explicit on the assault of racial discrimination. Johnson said, “Let me make one principle of this administration abundantly clear: All of these increased opportunities – in employment, in education, in housing, and in every field – must be open to all Americans of every color,” (Bailey & Danziger 2013: 8). This was the first time a President made it clear that these opportunities were for everyone. Even if it didn’t work out that way, at least a President was acknowledging the fact that there were power dynamics at play. He called for action and tried to support his claims that these federal funds were for everyone. He even said, “It was like you couldn’t pick up the blanket off a Negro at one corner, you had to pick it all up...It had to be housing and it had to be jobs and...everything you could think of,” (Bailey & Danziger 2013: 9). While this was not a successful attempt at ending poverty or even coming close to preventing it, it was the first time

that any President publicly announced that Black folks are poor, too, and they deserve the same federal funding as everyone else.

However, because he publicly claimed that African-Americans were poor, too, he allowed for much stigma to start coming into play for all Americans who were living in poverty or were on welfare of any kind. It is also important to note that "...Whereas the New Deal was developed in response to high unemployment and the grave economic crisis of the Great Depression, the War on Poverty was launched during a long period of widely shared prosperity," (Bailey & Danziger 2013: 3). This shows that even when things are going well, they could be better and worked to prevent things from going poorly again.

Johnson also made welfare available to women, too. And not just white women, but Black women as well. In the 1960s, strides were made toward fulfilling the promise of entitlement to income assistance for lone-mother headed families regardless of skin color (Neubeck 2006: 24). This was huge because it finally stated that women had the same human rights as everyone else, not that white women had more than Black women. Of course, however, Black women, because of social stigma, were still seen as less than and had to jump through many obstacles associated with obtaining welfare, but this was the first time that even Black women could attempt to obtain welfare—a step in the, what seemed to be, right direction. However, because Black women could now apply for welfare assistance, the welfare system as a whole began to become one of stigmatization which will be highlighted by the rhetoric of Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton.

### **President Nixon and Workfare**

Johnson brought poverty into the light, even if was a failure, he got the country talking about the issue of poverty. After Johnson, however, came President Nixon, taking office in

1969. Nixon, a Republican, had a very different view of welfare than the Democrat Johnson did. All in all, critics (conservatives) say that the War on Poverty created a dependence on government programs instead of giving those on welfare the pull yourself up by the bootstraps mentality. And that this dependency was of utmost importance for the conservatives taking office after President Johnson. They needed to declare a war on the war on poverty.

To combat this issue, one of the first things that President Nixon did as President was to turn welfare into **workfare** so as to get people to *actually* work and off of welfare rolls. This workfare was attempted to be implemented by a social program called the Work Incentive Program. The Work Incentive Program permitted states to **require** employable mothers to register for or participate in work outside the home regardless of age of their children at home (Mink [1998] 2002:38). Conservatives in Congress hoped that the Work Incentive Act would end welfare as a way of life, (Mink [1998] 2002:58), and rather give those receiving welfare short assistance, but still require them to have a life outside of the welfare system.

However, there was minimal training, time, and energy put into the program that was required of some women (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:37), so the program was doomed to fail from the beginning. The supposed incentive to participating in this program (whether mandated or not) was that there was promised well-paid work awaiting these women at the end of their training, however, there ended up not being enough work for everyone who participated in the program. So, all in all, the WIN program was a failure. Only a small percentage of those who were “eligible” for training got trained (to the tune of 300,000 out of a possible 2 million) and an even smaller number of those individuals who were trained ended up with jobs at the end—20%—even though the program promised jobs by the end. These jobs that the “lucky” were able to get at the end of their training were dead end jobs that paid minimum wage and did not

alleviate the social situation that these people were in before entering the WIN program, (Allen, ed. Mandell 1975:37).

On his way out of office, President Nixon signed into law the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). This Act terminated all relationships between the federal government and agencies that were representing the poor. By doing this, President Nixon took all the power away from the poor because of the decentralization of funds and representation of the poor, further disenfranchising those who are poor and on welfare.

### **Reaganomics and the Trickle-Down Misconception**

Once President Reagan took office, his Presidential aims were for the usage of trickle-down economics, and not for the goal of poverty reduction (Neubeck 2006: 28). Reagan drew on federalist traditions to give autonomy back to the states (Lawinski 2010: 29) which meant that across the United States, people on welfare received different amounts of money dependent upon the state and positionality of the person who was applying for welfare. This is showcased by the fact that, “Migrating Black women were less likely to be disqualified from the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) in the more liberal northern cities,” (Lawinski 2010:26) than in the South. This fact alone shows the discrimination that poor, Black women were facing in terms of trying to get welfare assistance for their own livelihood. And it is not like these Black women were migrating to the pristine conditions of the north. Rather, these women migrating north usually found themselves, “forced to live in city neighborhoods turned into ghettos,” (Neubeck 2006:26-7). Which, of course, is because of the history of racial segregation and the opportunities available to these women. So, it is not like when they moved north and were able to find more assistance nor did it mean that their lives got easier.

Beginning in 1981, the Reagan administration reduced funding for many domestic discretionary programs, (Bailey & Danziger 2013: 129). By cutting this funding, the Reagan administration simply said that they, as an administration, did not care as much about the livelihood of the poor. They see that poverty is the fault of the person who is living in poverty and that the poor should have to fend for and fund themselves. This mindset highly stigmatizes those living in poverty because it is becoming ingrained in them, from the highest position in the United States, that it is their own fault for their economic condition and that he is no longer going to support their living.

I do not think it is hard to see that Reagan made a mistake by taking autonomy away from the federal government and giving it to the states. In fact, by doing this, he not only took away the welfare right *for all* as evidenced above, but he, in fact, further stigmatized those on welfare in ways that truly hurt those on welfare. In the 1988 State of the Union Address, President Reagan said:

“My friends, some years ago, the federal government declared war on poverty, and poverty won. Today, the federal government has 59 major welfare programs and spends more than \$100 billion a year on them. What has all this money done? Too often it has only made poverty harder to escape.... With the best of intentions, government created a poverty trap that wreaks havoc on the very support system the poor need most to live themselves out of poverty—the family. Dependency has become the one enduring heirloom, passed from one generation to the next, of too many fragmented families,” (Bailey & Danziger 2013: 11-12).

While I agree with the part about the trap of the welfare cycle, I know that there is much more at play than simply blaming Johnson’s War on Poverty. If you look back to the 1920s and 1930s (as discussed in Chapter 3), you see that the original intention of these welfare programs were meant for white people to gain skills needed to better themselves and further separate themselves from poor classes. This very cycle is what we need to address and is the biggest problem in the welfare state today.

By cutting funding and not being a supporter of welfare, President Reagan successfully created a stigmatization discourse for those who are poor. He allowed for others to blame the poor for their poverty and showed the United States his viewpoint. He also incorporated negative images of women throughout the Republican Party platform as President (Lawinski 2010: 28). This takes the largest hold when we think of the term “welfare queen”. Reagan employed the term frequently in his presidential campaign and attempted to, if elected, eradicate America of this problem (New York Times). In his campaign, he said,

“She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veterans’ benefits on four nonexistent deceased husbands...She’s collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash alone is over \$150,000,” (“Welfare Queen’ Becomes Issue In Reagan Campaign,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1976, cited in Lawinski 2010: 28).

This is based off of one incident of a person who was committing large amount of welfare fraud over the course of her life (NPR 2011) but instead of mentioning it as a one-time occurrence, President Reagan branded this as every person who was on welfare and welfare and that it was the issue that needed to be fixed. This created a lot of stigma for those on welfare and thus created a stereotype for other Americans to envision when they, too, thought of welfare.

This stigmatization and “trickle down” social policy continued for those on welfare through the Presidencies of George Bush and Bill Clinton until the welfare reform of 1996 happened.

### **The Biggest Turn: The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act**

The biggest turn in terms of how we know our welfare system today came in the form of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) as signed into law by President Bill Clinton. This is a big deal and very important to note because

when we think of welfare today, we think of things set in motion by Reagan, but solidified by Clinton in 1996.

Clinton wanted to change the view of welfare, campaigning under the guise of welfare reform starting in 1992. “Do your part,” “pay it back,” “pay their fair share,” and “be responsible,” were the asks of Clinton to those on welfare (Lawinski 2010: 31). While this makes some sense, by providing autonomy to those on welfare and taking responsibility for the state aid, it also completely ignores so many social problems that are not the fault of the individual who is facing economic insecurity and lacks a critical lens of American society as a whole, by placing the blame of being poor on the people who are poor.

Clinton had, “visions...of creat[ing] ‘millions of new jobs and dozens of new industries,’ and ‘more incentives and more opportunity,’ for...businesspeople to develop workers’ skills and create jobs and wealth,” (Lawinski 2010:31). While this is a great vision to have, where were these jobs and industries going to come from? We have already seen from the failure of many work programs that these jobs do not simply just appear (Berkowitz & McQuaid 1980). But there needed to be a better plan in place in order to get welfare and those on welfare back on track.

Similarly, attempting to give autonomy back to those on welfare is a good idea in terms of marketing his campaign, but in reality that is not what he was doing. Clinton says, “You will have, and you deserve, the opportunity, through training and education, through childcare and medical coverage, to liberate yourself. But then, when you can, you must work, because welfare should be a second chance, not a way of life,” (Lawinski 2010: 31). Again, where is this liberation coming from? Nothing has yet been done to fix the problems in society that contribute

to making people poor, but now, the poor people are supposed to just liberate themselves and not be poor anymore? This was sorely misguided for a multitude of reasons.

In terms of liberation, when there is already so much stigma surrounding one and one's economic position, it becomes harder and harder to feel like liberation is right around the corner. As it has been evidenced so far throughout this project, poor people are stigmatized like no other, thus this feeling of liberation is a harder thing to imagine.

But, once in office, these dreams did not come true from President Clinton. The only thing that did manifest itself was The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The PRWORA masked the bipartisan war on against mothers who need welfare (Mink [1998] 2002:5) because the PROWRA may have been Republican legislation, but was a Democrat's inspiration. This goes to show that while there are politics at play, welfare and the legislation surrounding it is a class issue and is much more about keeping the poor, poor and the rich, well-off. Also, the PROWRA explicitly disclaims an entitlement for individuals (Mink [1998] 2002:6) which means that no one has a right to welfare anymore. Rather, one must prove oneself worthy of needing welfare, and then the government has to accept and approve the claim of need, thus stigmatizing those who need assistance because of all the hoops that they must jump through and the amount of work that must be put in to obtain any form of welfare.

However, because those who need welfare are poor, they are also educationally disadvantaged and do not necessarily know about all of the hoops they need to jump through in order to receive welfare. This is highlighted by the fact that, "three-fourths of all welfare/food stamp recipients perform at the lowest levels of literacy as defined by the National Adult Literacy Survey," (Lewis 1996). Because those on welfare are performing at the lowest

standards, those on welfare are unable to help themselves with their own education to fight poverty from within. Rather, the education system is keeping them trapped in their own economic disadvantaged status. To combat this, parents who are poor must work extra hard to ensure that their children are able to get an education and attempt to break the cycle. Lewis says, “There are young mothers and fathers whose literacy skills must be made good enough to prevent their children from reliving the cycle of low skills/low wages,” (1996). Until this lack of education is faced head on, the cycle will continue to keep poor people trapped in the system and the PROWRA certainly did not help to break the cycle.

The PROWRA was also supposed to mark the “end” of welfare by forcing all welfare recipients to start working so that there was no longer a dependency on welfare (Mink [1998] 2002; Neubeck 2006). In fact, the goal of the PROWRA was not to reduce poverty but to move from dependency to self-sufficiency (Neubeck 2006: 45) thus meaning that the focus was on forcing the individual off government assistance and into the work force, but all the while completely ignoring the societal factors at play that contribute to the class divide—i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality, just to name a few—and other societal issues of oppression.

Part of the PROWRA was to de-federalize the funds necessary for welfare and give much more autonomy to the states to decide what they wanted to do for those of their citizens in need. This was a bad decision, because as mentioned before, there were differences in the amount of welfare individuals were receiving depending on what state they lived in or what their status was viewed as where they were applying for welfare. In comparing the total number of welfare benefits by state in 2013, you can see how drastically different welfare packages can be state to state. For example, in Hawaii, the total number of welfare benefits was \$49,175 annually where as in Mississippi, it was \$16,984 (Tanner & Hughes 2013: 4-5). These are the most and least

packages in American in 2013, but you can see that there is a massive difference between the two. Because the PROWRA no longer required providing assistance to all needy families, some families had to go without and some families on welfare were getting different amounts depending on where they were living. This is a unique creation of suffering that poor families must experience and those who are well off do not. This allows for states to be further selective and marginalize individuals based on race and gender because of the selective nature that state governments employ in determining which families get the welfare assistance that they are allocating from their state budget. It also means that states can be more selective for equally needy families meaning that if there was a Black family and a white family with the exact same financial status, the state government would be able to give welfare to the white family and exclude the Black family, no questions asked. Similarly, noncitizens can be declared ineligible and mothers' marital status can affect the amount of assistance they get, too (Mink [1998] 2002: 63). In fact, in the preamble to the PROWRA, it says, "marriage is the foundation of a successful society."

There is also a notion that, with the PROWRA, those who are poor are responsible to take their own actions into consideration and are the sole reason for being poor. This places far too much responsibility on those who experience economic hardship and thus creates a stressor for those people.

To lower recipient numbers on welfare rolls, workfare is utilized to ensure that mothers are working and thus "bettering themselves". However, the PROWRA does not require work to pay nor does it make work available, (Mink [1998] 2002: 113), so how do supporters of the PROWRA expect these poor people to actually make it out of poverty and support themselves once working? If these programs do not exist, and are not being created, nothing is getting done.

But it is not like people do not understand the importance of welfare and getting off of it. In fact, the PROWRA basically says that single-mothers are worth more outside their home than in it, (Mink [1998] 2002: 113), but it does not give these mothers any chance to be worth more besides simply saying that they are worth more outside. Similarly, the PROWRA does not afford these mothers any reimbursement for childcare and so these mothers are often strapped because how are they supposed to care for or pay for care for their children if it is not offered? Especially if they are not being paid for the work they are required to do? “Poor families already spend 27 percent of their monthly income on childcare (as compared to 7 percent spent by families with incomes above the poverty line),” (Mink [1998] 2002: 114). As you can see from this, the PRWORA was not meant to help poor, single mothers nor was its aim to address the societal issue of poverty. Rather, it’s main focus is to get the numbers of people on welfare down and leave it at that.

To get these numbers down and to get them to stay down, the PRWORA has some tricky loopholes involved in its legislation that forces people to max out of their time on welfare. For example, the PRWORA imposes time limits which means that once someone exhausts their time limits on welfare, then there will be none left for them later in their lives, no matter what circumstances may come up for them. This means that if these poor individuals were to EVER fall on hard economic times again—or simply lived as a member of a marginalized identity group (i.e. a person of color)—then there is absolutely no support or assistance available for them. As Lawinski says in her book, “No matter what, a time limit for welfare benefits of *any* length is unconscionable and also contributes to inequality in the United States,” (2010:88). These time constraints are also only in place for the poor; for the middle and upper classes of society do not have to deal with their assistance—or livelihood—being threatened, which means

that these poor people are having tremendous amounts of stress about losing much more than money for support of their lives, but also losing their lives.

The PRWORA does a lot of things, but many of which are done wrong. For,

“The PRWORA in effect suggest[s] that lone mothers would otherwise be happy living on welfare indefinitely... implies that lone mothers are lazy and need to be coerced out of idleness... suggests that left alone, lone mothers are prone to immoral out-of-wedlock behavior leading to the birth of illegitimate children...[and]implies that poor immigrants are drawn to the United States by its generous welfare benefits and, once here, they and their families become leeches on the backs of taxpayers,” (Neubeck 2006: 31)

But there is no evidence to suggest that those on welfare are lazy and do not wish to work (Tanner & Hughes 2013: 3), rather, that is a stereotype that has been made to exist.

Clinton’s Work First philosophy was to get poor mothers to work, but then did not follow through with offering support to them nor did they seem to care about what happened to these mothers once in the workforce, (Neubeck 2006: 29). So really, he and his administration left these poor women out on their own and they had to hope for the best in terms of making it in society.

### **A Success?**

So the question then becomes was welfare reform a success? According to Neubeck, “Welfare Reform can only be considered a success if the ultimate problem to be solved is welfare recipient,” (Neubeck 2006: 63). As you can see with Clinton, he successfully made poverty an issue of the individual and not of the federal or even state governments. Because no efforts have been focused on solving poverty outside of the welfare recipient’s problem, welfare reform has not and will not be successful. According to another welfare mother, welfare reform is not a success. She says, “[Welfare reform] was portrayed initially as a program that would result in people moving out of poverty...Let’s just say what it actually is, which is a program that puts people to work and stops public assistance, and it doesn’t matter what the work is,” (Reese

2005: 3). This welfare mother showcases how the welfare reform actually just focuses on ending welfare programs and not actually addressing the issues of poverty and poorness. Just because the number of caseloads of those on welfare were being lowered, it does not mean that poverty was going down. In fact, a national study of mothers who left welfare from 1995 to 1999 found that between 40 and 50 percent of these women were not working, and 12 to 20 percent had no apparent source of income (Reese 2005: 4). I think because of these reasons, it is fair to say that welfare reform is not a success.

I am going to continue this conversation in the next chapter by discussing, in more detail, the stigmatization of those on welfare and how the United States government is complicit in this stigmatization, specifically focusing post the 1996 welfare reform.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### HOW WELFARE STIGMATIZES THOSE IT IS MEANT TO HELP

As I showed in chapter three, “[t]he term ‘welfare’ had a positive connotation when it first came into use in the early twentieth century because it differentiated old relief practices from the newly instituted social programs,” (Lawinski 2010:23) and it allowed for poor white men to be able to get back on their feet after World War I and the Great Depression took a lot out of the success of the nuclear family. However, the term welfare and the stigma associated with those who are on welfare is a new thing, originating from the War on Poverty when President Lyndon Johnson allowed for African-American women to be able to apply for welfare programs, as witnessed in chapter four. According to Neubeck, when African American women were finally allowed to be on welfare, there was a misconception from everyone, but also from white single-mothers also on welfare, that the African American mothers would *prefer* to be on welfare than to work (Neubeck 2006: 26). Throughout this chapter, I will showcase more obvious forms of stigmatization for those living in poverty and on welfare.

#### **Stigma In Relation To Others**

According to Goffman, when talking about differences with someone who has a stigmatized identity (or identities—see chapter one), “we may perceive his defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his defect, and then see both the defect and response as just retribution for something he or his parents or his tribe did, and hence a justification of the way we treat him,” (Goffman 1963: 6). He continues, “Even while the stigmatized individual is told that he is a human being like everyone else, he is being told that it would be unwise to pass or to let down his group. In brief, he is told he is like anyone else and that he isn’t—although there is little agreement among spokesmen as to how much of each he should claim to be,” (Goffman

1963: 124). This means that people living on welfare and dealing with the stigma associated with being on welfare are constantly in an in-between state and have to take additional steps to balance whether or not they share with the rest of the world that they are on welfare.

I remember as a child always skirting away from the conversations of class and socio-economic status because of the shame that I experienced from being poor. In fact, I remember that at the grocery store, when my mom would swipe her Food Stamps card, she would whisper to the cashier that we needed to use Food Stamps instead of credit or debit—whether there were people behind us or not. This experience of shame is not unique to my experience. In fact, many people constantly think about their financial status and the stigma surrounding them, for conversations and thoughts about having money are ever present in the minds of those who do not have money. As sixteen year old Kayleigh says,

“I worry about Sam [my younger brother] all the time. Because once you’re marked, you’re marked for life. The minute people know you’re poor, they assume, and you immediately lose that friend. You have to be so careful what you say because you’re automatically in the back of your head you’re going what if I say something and they don’t like it. What if I let something slip, you’ve always got the what if’s going through your head,” says sixteen-year-old Kayleigh who is eleven-year-old Sam’s sister (BBC 2011).

Being poor and thinking about how others may be looking at you is something that takes a lot of headspace.

This is further highlighted in Terese Lawinski’s book, *Living on the Edge in Suburbia*. When she received a call from someone who saw a flyer with her information on it, the woman was then given the opportunity to choose the meeting place for their interview. “She did not want to meet at her downtown diner...She did not want anyone in her community to overhear that she was ‘on welfare’,” (2010: 23). This notion of not wanting anyone to be able to find out that she is on welfare is common across many people on welfare because of the shame and

stigma associated with such things. But it goes a step further. Lawinski says, “the people who I interviewed that received welfare rarely used the formal program names or their acronyms but referred to the welfare program simply as ‘welfare,’ or being ‘on welfare’,” (2010: 170).

Keeping these interactions so private, though, only further perpetuates the stigmatization of welfare participants, both internally and externally. Lawinski finishes, “Most people who gave their opinion about welfare valued the program as a vital financial resource. But their disparate critiques were influenced by their personal experiences, treatment by welfare office staff, program rules, and the negative stereotypes and stigma associated with the program and its recipients,” (2010:170-71). This showcases that those on welfare, at least those who Lawinski interviewed, note how important welfare assistance is for their livelihood, yet, are very aware of the perception that those who are not on welfare have of those who are on welfare.

This creates an inherent class divide: those on welfare and those not on welfare. Greig Inglis says in his article, *The Stigma of Poverty*, that, “Poverty stigma creates divisions between ‘the poor’ and ‘the non-poor’ which serve to justify and maintain socioeconomic inequalities,” (2016). These justifications allow for socioeconomic status to become an inherent part of determining who is worthy in society and who is viewed as a disposable person. In fact, because of the way welfare operates, especially because of the fact that it originated for the poor, white man, welfare has been used as a way of sorting out the ‘deserving poor’ from the ‘undeserving poor’, (Abramovitz cited in Neubeck 2006: 36), another classification within the already existing classification of those living in poverty. By having a poor class and a non-poor class—with hierarchies existing in the already hierarchical nature of class—inherent privilege is clearly associated with the class of people who have money. This stigmatizes the poor class and those

living in poverty and thus creates a divide of socioeconomic status groups in society, as discussed by Durkheim in chapter 3.

### **Internationalization of Shame**

Apart from the social divide of socioeconomic status, though, there is also an internalization that happens for those on welfare. Those on welfare are not only fighting the external stigma that society is placing upon them, but also facing their own inner stigma that they place upon themselves. Because of the divide of poor and non-poor in society, many people who fall into the category of poor “come to think of themselves as inadequate or having failed in some way,” (Ingles 2016). These feelings of inadequacy and fault that those on welfare have are not the fault of those who are poor—which is often the narrative that is employed when discussing those living in poverty, that it is a fault of their own bad choices—but rather a failure of the state. There are a whole host of reasons as to why one might end up on welfare not related to their “bad choices” that politicians who oppose welfare like to claim. “The foremost pressure was insufficient household income to support a family, stemming mainly from one or more aspects of an inadequate labor market,” (Lawinski 2010: 68), which is clearly a fault of the state.

People also seek out welfare for a variety of reasons relating to unexpected life circumstances such as the onset of motherhood; long-standing child rearing; food inadequacy; unaffordable housing; homelessness; family destabilization such as the breakup, death, or incarceration of a spouse; procreation needs; domestic violence; and illness of a child or family member (Lawinski 2010:68-9). These circumstances are unpredictable and one should not have to take on the role of predicting the future, as well as living their life and carrying out already in place life responsibilities, when there are (or should be) programs meant to help mitigate financial need in times of crises or other unexpected life events, which is why, in chapter four of

this thesis, I discuss how there should not be time limits for those on welfare because unexpected things can happen at any time and cause anyone to have a financial crisis.

But there does not exist a social safety net in place to ensure that when these unexpected life circumstances happen, things will turn out to be okay in the end; in fact sometimes being on welfare can feel like quite the opposite. Even when life is continuing at its normal pace, those on welfare cannot seem to make it by because of how society functions against those who are poor. A study revealed that, “wage earning single mothers with skills and education comparable to others receiving welfare are often worse off because they are earning wages,” (Mink [1998] 2002: 112-13). The wages that those on welfare who are working are earning are far below the actual amount of money needed to survive. It is known that, “60 percent of all poor families with children are single-mother families; and among solo mothers who support their children mainly through their earnings, 60 percent earn a poverty level income (\$13,300 for a family of three in 1997) or below,” (Mink [1998] 2002: 106). The idea is supposed to be that by having those on welfare work, they can then afford the things they need to live.

But that is not the case because, “Wage earnings are eaten up by the cost of clothing for work, transportation, and childcare... [not to mention] food and rent,” (Mink [1998] 2002: 113), which means that by the time all is spent and accounted for, those on welfare are in a more peculiar situation because they do not have enough money to spend on their own livelihood, much less on unexpected life circumstances. As I have mentioned previously, my mother was in a worse economic situation when she would try to work because of the fact that she lost all benefits but still had to pay for all of the aforementioned things with her minimum wage job. Her case is not unique, but rather a common occurrence for people across the board who are on welfare as noted in the 2013 report, *The Welfare Versus Work Trade Off*. According to the

report, welfare pays more than a minimum-wage job in 33 states—in many cases, significantly more. In fact, in a dozen states and the District of Columbia, welfare pays more than \$15 per hour (Tanner & Hughes 2013: 8), a wage far above the national minimum wage.

### **The Intersection of Race, Class, and Motherhood**

However, there is a large race component to the stigmatization of those on welfare, too, rather than just class. Even before looking at socioeconomic status, Black women face a litany of stigma in society.

“African American women are structurally positioned to experience shame more frequently than others. As a group they possess a number of stigmatized identities and life circumstances: they are more likely to be poor, to be unmarried, to parent children alone, to be overweight, to be physically ill, and to be undereducated and underemployed. Black women who escape these circumstances must still contend with damaging racial and gender stereotypes. They are aware that others see them through a distorted lens that renders them socially unacceptable. This sense of social rejection and undesirability may express itself in experiences of chronic shame, with both psychological and physical effects...In this sense, shame is the psychological and physical effect of repeated acts of misrecognition,” (Harris-Perry as cited in Williams 2018: 34).

But even more so than just their skin tone, Black women are much more stigmatized in terms of their socioeconomic status, too. “Negative beliefs about Black mothers receiving public assistance are about 2.5 times more likely to be associated with negative attitudes about welfare mothers than negative beliefs about similarly situated White mothers,” (Gilens, as cited in Hancock 2004: 52). This stems from the political rhetoric that was represented by Reagan, as discussed in chapter four, and his discussion of the welfare queen and the harm the welfare queen was causing for the well-being and integrity of the welfare state. The term welfare queen “is a phrase that describes economic dependency—the lack of a job and/or income; the presence of a child or children with no father and/or no husband (moral deviance); and finally, a charge on the collective U.S. Treasury—a human debit,” (Lubiano as cited in Hancock 2004: 56), and is

associated with all Black mothers, but also all poor people who are on welfare, thus creating a very stigmatizing experience for those people who fall into those categories.

However, the rhetoric also negatively affected poor mothers. “Many welfare reformers view work requirements as necessary not because all mothers should be in the labor market, but because *poor single* mothers ought to be,” (Mink [1998] 2002: 23). This is a stigmatizing point of view to hold because of the responsibility it puts on poor mothers and their duty to work, whereas mothers who come from money, either do not need to work and can stay at home with their children, or, mothers who come from money can afford decent child care and have their children successfully watched over while they are at work. With the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the Clinton-era welfare “reform”, no one called for policies that would allow single mothers to stay at home with their children, even though experts say that children are better raised by their parents (Mink [1998] 2002:121). Instead, Clinton advisers say that wages are more important than raising their children, (Mink [1998] 2002: 121), which is a problem only for the poor class. This stigmatizes those on welfare because those on welfare have to make tough choices in regards to their children and their children’s wellbeing. Many of the jobs that those on welfare have do not allow for children to accompany the worker, therefore taking money out of the paycheck for those on welfare.

But even more so, the obligation for work outside the home is ridiculous because it devalues the unpaid work that mothers are completing inside the home in caring for their children and other family members. The PRWORA requirement says that any job is a better alternative for women outside the home rather than staying at home and caring for their children (Mink [1998] 2002: 108). This is not the case, because, again this forces women to take jobs that are degrading or do not pay a living wage. This is stigmatizing because when seen doing

degrading jobs, these women are thus placed into a category, as I have discussed earlier, and forced to be somewhere they don't need to be. More so, however, community service is often cited as a way for those on welfare to fulfill the work requirement; however, according to Mink, community service is usually menial work and is seen as degrading ( [1998] 2002:109). When seen in public completing such menial work, those on welfare are further stigmatized.

Further stigmatization occurs when discussing the notion of entitlement that is established by the United States government for those who are on welfare or living in poverty. With the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act's provision that those on welfare must work outside the home to receive assistance, the act is thus saying that one has to prove that they are deserving of welfare in order to get any form of assistance—another stigmatizing force that places those on welfare in a unique situation.

Because of the stigmatization of those on welfare, many people who are on welfare try to conceal their financial status. “The common ground of norms can be sustained far beyond the circle of those who fully recognize them; this is a statement, of course, about the social function of these processes and not about their cause or desirability. Passing and covering are involved...through which the individual exerts strategic control over the image of himself and his products that others glean from him,” (Goffman 1963: 129-30). Because poor individuals have to try and pass as non-poor, they face many psychological costs of being poor because of the constant lies they have to tell to the world.

And the United States government is doing nothing about this pressure, but rather only makes it harder and harder for welfare recipients and those living in poverty.

Welfare has never been treated as a ‘right,’ and from a feminist perspective, U.S. welfare policy has never been responsive to the serious problems faced by impoverished lone-mother

headed families (Neubeck 2006: 35). In fact, their voices often are not even listened to. Rather, welfare has been treated as a privilege, and one that can be taken away at any time, causing much emotional distress and trouble for poor women. Because welfare is treated as a privilege, there is a notion of disgust with those who utilize the system, even though it is there to help support those who need financial support. Hancock says, “The ongoing evidence of the politics of disgust highlights a troubling problem for our democracy overall, not simply for the women saddled with the public identity of the “welfare queen”. The emotion of disgust and its political manifestations continue to marginalize a significant percentage of an already disadvantaged population,” (2004: 137). The longer this disgust exists, the longer the stigmatization for those on welfare or living in poverty will exist, too.

In the conclusion chapter, I will offer some recommendations of where the welfare system in America should go because it is clear that welfare reform has not helped this notion of stigmatization of the poor class. Reese says, “This stingy, exclusive, and stigmatizing character of welfare in the United States is partly the result of the arrested development of the American welfare state. It is also the product of successive, and increasingly powerful, waves of welfare cutbacks,” (Reese 2005: 199). Because of these welfare cutbacks, those on welfare or living in poverty were stigmatized even further. She continues, “Rising attacks on welfare reflected the spread of neoliberal ideas among business leaders, particularly ideologically conservative and low-wage employers, who were experiencing increased pressure to cut costs in the new postindustrial and global economy,” (Reese 2005: 201). If these ideologies did not exist and the pressure was not something that was such a strong presence in society, stigmatization for those on welfare might not be as big of an issue. However, because of how entrenched in the welfare system we are in America, in order to solve the issue of stigmatization and ensuring that those on

welfare get what they actually need, I will suggest repeal and restructuring of the system we have today.

However, before I leave this chapter, I wish to call your attention to the stigmatization of those on welfare one final time and challenge you to break down your own notions of welfare, and those living in poverty. I implore you to have an open mind and begin having discussions of class in many different contexts so that we can begin to normalize conversations surrounding class but also so that poor people's voices can be heard and their viewpoints treated as valid.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **FINAL REFLECTIONS ON THE WELFARE SYSTEM**

As you have seen throughout this thesis, poverty affects many people from children to poor white folks, to poor Black folks, including Black folks that are not on welfare. Welfare affects people in many different ways, thus creating a unique experience for each individual who experiences poverty at all.

It has been shown that there are many problems with the welfare system that we have employed in America, and the three main reform strategies to “fix” the problem of welfare have not worked. That is because the system was broken from the beginning. From its start as a system that was meant to help the poor, white men get back on their feet after World War I to be able to provide a living for their families, the system was never meant to be one for women nor for Black folks. Therefore, I claim that we need to completely restructure the entirety of the welfare system in America. We need to be able to start fresh and actually work with individuals and their needs. It is important to note that individuals have different needs. So, by making a welfare state that is strict and has little room for flexibility, those in charge of the welfare state inherently make it worse off for the people who need the welfare. Take medical care, for example. You wouldn’t give the same healthcare plan to people who all had chest pain. Rather you would look at the individual reasons for the chest pain, and try to fix those reasons for that one particular person instead of giving all patients the same treatment plan. A woman that Terese Lawinski interviewed talks about welfare programs and said, “You can’t lump people together in a clump and say that’s good for everyone,” (2010: 84). With the 60-month limit of welfare that the federal government imposed with the passage of the PRA, they clearly misunderstand that life happens over the course of more than just five years. By only allowing

people to receive aid for a total of five years, welfare is completely missing the boat on what needs to be done and how to do it.

This is the problem: there is no flexibility in terms of the welfare system for differing needs in terms of the individual. With the 1996 PRA, President Clinton and his administration made the welfare system so strict that it does not allow an individual to live a life free from the worry that if something goes wrong, there will be a safety net for them. Rather, people now have to plan out when to have “accidents” so that they can carefully use their safety net when they need it most. Otherwise, it will not exist and there will be a lot of pain in terms of having to make financial sacrifices. This is why we need to restructure the welfare system altogether; so that we can actually provide safety to people who need it.

We also need to break the notion of stigmatization of those who are poor and those on welfare. “There is a dominant narrative [that corresponds with the welfare system] that seeks to blame people for their circumstances; the result of a history of poor choices,” (Keilthy 2018). But as we are aware, it is not a history of poor choices that cause people to be poor, it is the larger social structures that are responsible for causing poorness and keeping people poor. We need to change this narrative to one that blames the state for the issues of failing and not the people who end up poor. This is one of the first steps needed to be taken to destigmatize those on welfare and those who are poor. If we do not do this, the stigmatization for those who are poor or are welfare will continue without addressing the underlying issues that exist. Instead, by keeping the narrative the way that it is, we are simply only further stigmatizing people living in poverty—nothing more, nothing less.

It is also important to note that social welfare is a form of social control. Because of how the system currently operates, those in charge are able to determine valid personhood from

disposable personhood at the bat of an eye and welfare has been a way of “separating the deserving poor from the underserving poor” (Abramovitz cited in Neubeck 2006: 36) since the inception of the system. According to Crenshaw, social control and ability to sort the deserving from the undeserving is not only a function of the criminal justice system, the system that is putting more and more People of Color behind bars and removed from society, but also a function of the welfare state, which disenfranchises and stigmatizes those on welfare, (2012: 1428).

### **What We Should Do**

So, that begs the question: if there are so many issues with the social welfare system, what needs to be done?

As mentioned earlier, I believe that the entire system should be repealed and restructured into a system that takes into account all people, and not just poor, white, able-bodied men, that the system was first intended for. Rather, the welfare system should be something that is equal to all and has a way of working for all people regardless of how often or not someone might need to use the system.

Also, it is important to address the lack of resources for people living in poverty and the root causes that lead to poverty, such as poor healthcare, lack of a good education, and stronger community service organizations to address the underlying root of poverty and help those who are in it, get out. As Keilthy suggests, “Social and economic policies should be based on the belief that everyone should have equal rights and access to healthcare, social services, education and culture. This approach would provide the basis to address the structural barriers to quality employment such as low educational attainment, the lack of affordable housing and childcare, discrimination in the labor market and the issues of low paid and precarious work,” (2018). This

would provide a general basis for everyone in society and create a more equal society, with fair options, for all people to live in. Of course, this would mean that we would need to dismantle capitalism all together, but that is an entirely different thesis in and of itself. Instead, what Reese suggests is that, “To move forward, activists and politicians need to promote a second ‘New Deal’ one that will address the needs of, and promote solidarity among poor, single mothers and other working families,” (Reese 2005: 204). Similarly, to how the original New Deal created welfare programs for poor, white, married men, this New Deal could focus on everyone—specifically those already living in poverty and work to fix the issues that are in existence for those who are living on welfare or in poverty currently. However, the only way to ensure that the issues that are actually plaguing those living in poverty are properly dealt with is to actively listen to those who are living in poverty and giving their voices and their experiences the time and place that they deserve.

To truly understand what is going on with the social welfare state and how it is affecting people who are part of it, it is important to include the voices of those who are marginalized and negatively affected by the welfare system in the discussion of welfare reform. Keilthy says, “we need to include the voice of people who are experiencing poverty and marginalization in decision making. Listening to real-life situations changes our attitudes and understanding of poverty,” (Keilthy 2018), so that we can actually address the needs of the people who are actively going to be benefitting from the changes we make. However, this has been a failure of policymakers and legislators for a long time. According to Hancock, “When single, poor, African-American mothers attempted to explain the reasons for policy failure and articulate their own needs, the public identity of welfare recipients helped prevent their political claims from being classified as legitimate—effectively preventing their empowered participation in the public discourse,” (2004:

62). If the people who are being affected by policy changes are not being listened to for the ways that the changes are actually affecting the people in the world, then why do Congress people say that they want to hear from their constituents? If their stories are not going to be listened to, then why have them share them in the first place? It is important that this fact changes—not just for welfare, but for all things related to government policy—so that all people who are being affected can actually feel that they have a voice and can enact change for their own livelihood.

### **What I Have Learned**

Throughout this process, I have learned a lot about the welfare system in America and how it affects those that utilize it. Growing up, I was a happy kid. I always had food on the table, I had a roof over my head, I had clothes on my body, I had lunch at school, I had health insurance so that if anything popped up I was certain to be covered, and I was able to participate in head-start and preschool programs because of government welfare programs (and lots of financial support from my grandfather). I never gave much of these things a second thought until my class consciousness began to become cemented in me sometime around the age of twelve or thirteen, even after the school lunch fiasco I described earlier. I quickly became intimately aware of the fact that my family did not have as much money as my classmates nor did I have all the same opportunities as them, often having to fill out additional fee waivers or fundraise to support all my extracurricular activities in middle and high school.

Talking about class and financial status has been something that I have struggled with for my entire life, even since getting to Vassar because of the fact that class is such a hush-hush topic. Being a QuestBridge match recipient at Vassar has allowed me to feel proud of the fact that my socioeconomic status is not my only defining feature, and that there is much more to me

than my mother's tax bracket. It makes the stigma surrounding class almost worth it to be able to say that I am going to graduate from Vassar with a degree in sociology all the while being from a family that lives just above the poverty line.

However, I feel grateful at the fact that I could have this journey with this thesis because of the situation that doing this research has given me. For, I had no idea that the welfare system was originally intended for poor white men and that the welfare system only became one of stigmatization after President Johnson allowed African-American women the right—their inalienable right—to apply for social welfare programs. I did not realize how poverty affected children across the country, especially in terms of the emotional costs that poor children encounter every day. I never gave much thought to the emotional costs that growing up poor meant for me, but this thesis has allowed for a substantial amount of self-reflection and I see ways how growing up poor affected me from a younger age today than I have ever noticed in the past. I also just had no idea at just how stigmatizing being poor and being on welfare is until I completed this thesis.

### **A Final Challenge**

It is my hope that you, the reader, can walk away from this thesis with a better understanding of the welfare system in America and a grasp of how stigmatizing the system itself is for those who are poor or who are on welfare of any kind. However, more importantly, I hope that you can be sympathetic towards those who are poor or are on welfare. Stop the stigmatization from you and spread it around you like wildfire. Allow class discussion to become part of your normal conversations and not with people from your tax bracket, but all over the place. And also understand that those who are poor or on welfare are not all going to be able to access this thesis—a true fault of the education system in America. So, if you find

yourself finishing this thesis, keep that in mind and remember that people cannot pull themselves up from the bootstraps if the bootstraps did not exist in the first place.

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