

# Black Families & Legislative History Leading up to TANF



**NAACFRC**  
National African American Child  
and Family Research Center

## The early 1930s: Beginning



Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) was established by the Social Security Act of 1935 as a grant program to enable states to provide cash welfare payments for children who had been deprived of parental support or care. States defined “need,” set their own benefit levels, established income and resource limits, and administered the program or supervised its administration. Black families made up a small share of ADC cases, especially in southern states.

## Mid 1950 to 1960s: Self-Sufficiency & AFDC



In the 1960s, ADC became Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The Social Security Amendments of 1967 (P.L. 90-248), for the first time, included requirements for AFDC mothers to work and maintain a “suitable home” as the number of Black women in the AFDC caseloads began to grow.<sup>2</sup>

## Late 1960s & 1970s: Basic Income



In 1969, President Richard Nixon proposed the Family Assistance Plan (FAP), a basic-income style program to replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Although it initially gained traction, FAP ultimately failed in Congress, in part because anxieties about poor mothers’ roles shaped the debate.<sup>3</sup> At the time, many white voters believed welfare was going overwhelmingly to Black families, even though federal data show that in 1969 AFDC recipients were nearly evenly split—46.6 percent Black and 46.2 percent White—and by 1975 White families made up a slight majority of cases.<sup>4</sup> Media portrayals linking welfare with Blackness further reinforced these perceptions, contributing to the program’s defeat.<sup>5</sup>

## The 1980s: Devolution & Early Experiments



In the 1980s, stereotypes of “welfare queens” contributed to the development of policies that imposed additional restrictions on obtaining benefits.<sup>6</sup>

The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 (P.L. 97-35) limited the “earnings disregard” enacted in 1967, which by law required states to disregard portions of the applicant’s income. This new act ended benefits for many who were on the rolls and working.<sup>2</sup>

The Family Support Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-485) established in AFDC the notion of mutual responsibility between the cash assistance recipient and the state. Stereotypes influenced the Act’s notion of “mutual responsibility” because of inaccurate beliefs that Black women were abusing the system.<sup>2</sup>

## 1992 to 1996: Ending Welfare As We Know It



The number of families receiving cash assistance had been stable during the period from 1982 to 1988. However, beginning in the summer of 1989 the number of families receiving cash assistance began to increase once again.<sup>7</sup> Since 1995, the number of Black families receiving welfare has declined sharply, falling to levels not seen in decades.<sup>8</sup>

## 1996 & Balanced Budget Act of 1997



The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193) was a comprehensive bipartisan welfare reform plan that dramatically changed the nation’s welfare system into one that requires work in exchange for time-limited assistance.<sup>9</sup> The 1996 welfare reform law repealed AFDC and some of its related programs and replaced it with the TANF block grant. The TANF-to-poverty ratio (TPR) measures how many families in poverty receive aid. Currently, fourteen states have a TANF-to-poverty ratio of 10 or fewer, and these states have higher shares of the nation’s Black children.<sup>1</sup>

## TANF Legislation 2010 to Present



The long-term extension of TANF enacted in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 expired at the end of fiscal year (FY) 2010. Congress continued TANF program authority and funding through a series of short-term extensions. Funding lapsed during broader “government shutdowns” in October 2013 and beginning in December 2018.<sup>2</sup>

While the COVID-19 pandemic offered temporary changes to TANF eligibility, those changes have expired. Today, Black TANF participants comprise more than one-third of TANF recipients despite only representing 13% of the total U.S. population. In 2022, the U.S. experienced its largest increase in child poverty in more than half a century, underscoring the ongoing need for effective cash assistance.<sup>10</sup>

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