

# Work Requirements Are Trash



**THE MAVEN**  
COLLABORATIVE

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## Introduction

The most succinct and accurate way to comprehend why pushing people into forced labor to prove their worth in order to have food and shelter through our social safety net programs is to understand this fundamental truth: slavery is the original work requirement.

Policies that force labor in exchange for benefits, more commonly referred to as work requirements, are based on narratives on who is deserving and a full human being from our racist history of chattel slavery, and make it nearly impossible for families to meet their very basic needs. It has been proven time and time again that they are an ineffective and punitive tool that deepen poverty and hardship. While all recipients are harmed by these policies, Black and brown people are most likely to lose assistance as a [result of work requirements](#). Despite this, their popularity has risen among some leaders on the left and most on the right — even as the past two decades generated a wealth of research exposing how work requirements ignore the realities of the low-wage labor market, are ineffective at getting people into quality jobs, and create real economic harm to families and society.

The rise of work requirements in our social safety net in the 1980s and 1990s is a part of a recurring tactic of white supremacy. Any actual or perceived expansion of Black and brown people's political and/or economic power or well-being is met with efforts to limit their civic engagement and tie them to exploitative work. For example, Black codes and Jim Crow laws that passed post emancipation and during and after Reconstruction [recreated something akin to enslavement](#) for many Black people in the South. Along the same lines, the decades after the Civil Rights Movement not only saw state and federal lawmakers codify work requirements in TANF and SNAP, but perhaps even more heartlessly instituted a system that led to the mass incarceration of mostly Black and brown people. The carceral system limits millions of people's ability to vote, get decent jobs, and access many economic supports.

With every turn of any forward movement for Black people, a plan is hatched to push them back and work requirements are just another tool to do just that.

Twenty-seven years after the passage of the welfare reform law that enshrined strict work requirements in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance program and created time limits for unemployed SNAP recipients who don't live with children, the country is again seeing a movement for racial and economic justice through cash programs. Guaranteed income pilots such as Magnolia Mother's Trust led by Dr. Aisha Nyandoro, Abundant Birth Project led by Dr. Zea Malawa, and In Her Hands led by Hope Wollensack are taking root across the country. Black women and other people of color are again at the vanguard of this movement, articulating many of the same themes as the Civil Rights movement leaders at the National Welfare Rights Organization who first pushed for cash without restrictions more than half a century ago. Additionally, many in Congress are also understanding the value and pragmatism of unrestricted cash and passed multiple rounds of stimulus payments in 2020 and the temporary enhancements to the Child Tax Credit (CTC), in 2021. The temporary removal of the CTC's work requirements and the monthly distribution of larger benefits contributed to the [largest decline in child poverty on record](#), especially for Black and brown children. Unfortunately, the CTC enhancements did not continue and child poverty rose again the following year.

The fact that these programs, and their absence of work requirements, were a resounding success is an important acknowledgement that the most marginalized people deserve to live a life of their own making.

As the movement to bring guaranteed income pilots to policy and other no strings attached cash policies continue to build momentum, it is important to understand the anti-blackness behind work requirements and empower social safety net recipients with the trust and freedom they rightly deserve by putting work requirements in the garbage, where trash belongs.



## The Economic Argument Against Work Requirements

The evidence is clear: work requirements fail to sustainably increase employment in high-quality jobs. They also inflict significant collateral damage on people who need access to support through public benefits programs — and the economy at large. As we outline below, research shows work requirements adversely affect employment, increase poverty, impact macroeconomic outcomes, and inflate wasteful government spending.

### Employment and Poverty

Work requirements not only fail at increasing employment amongst welfare recipients but can also push working people out of employment, when they do not have access to health care, or can't afford their commuting costs.

**Evidence indicates that work requirements do not have a meaningful effect on labor supply.**

In fact, they are a problem in search of a solution as the overwhelming majority of people who are subject to work requirements are already working. Most of the remaining are people who are supposed to be exempt, such as people with disabilities. Participants of SNAP and Medicaid, for example, predominantly constitute millions of full-time workers who rely on these programs because of their jobs' low wages, unpredictable schedules, and lack of benefits. Almost 90 percent of SNAP participants in households with children (and at least one adult without a disability) are employed at some point within the year. More than 60 percent of non-elderly Medicaid participants are working (sometimes multiple jobs).

**Work requirements are ineffective in sustainably increasing employment.** Research shows that when employment increases among individuals subject to work requirements, the gains are modest and fade over time. In nearly all of the approximately dozen programs evaluated, employment among recipients not subject to work requirements was the same as, or higher than,

employment among individuals subject to work requirements within five years. Additionally, most recipients who have significant barriers to employment to begin with (such as disability, lack of high school diplomas, or lack of available jobs), [do not find employment due to work requirements](#). This remains true [even where they participate in employment programs](#) that are particularly “successful” at increasing employment amongst those facing traditional barriers.

**Even where work requirements do lead to increases in employment, they are ineffective in connecting people to jobs that bring people out of poverty.** Not all jobs are created equal, and the focus of leaders should be to increase the ability of workers to secure *good* jobs — not any job. This is evidenced by the fact that the vast majority of individuals subject to work requirements [continue to experience poverty](#). And worse, some experience even deeper poverty due to the loss of benefits. For example, even in [studies](#) that showed that recipients were more likely to be employed in the first two years after becoming subject to work requirements, the earnings were not sufficient to lift such recipients out of poverty. And in some programs, the share of families living in [deep poverty increased](#).

Work requirements fail to have lasting positive impacts on employment not only because they are indifferent to the context of the labor market and the marginalization that people of color and people experiencing poverty must navigate in our economy, but also because they do not help people gain the necessary education and skills to achieve stable, quality employment. The programs that most successfully mitigated these consequences are ones that allowed individuals subject to work requirements [to improve their education or build their skills](#). However, education and skill-building support can be offered outside of the context of work requirements.

**The main result of work requirements in most cases is the loss of benefits.** For example, in 2018, Arkansas implemented work requirements in Medicaid as part of a Trump administration effort to get states to condition eligibility for the health insurance program on work. [More than 18,000 beneficiaries lost their health coverage](#) until a federal judge reversed the requirements in 2019. Empirical studies of work requirements for certain SNAP recipients also confirm a similar outcome. One study found no effects on employment, but a [53 percent decline in program participation](#).

Proponents of work requirements attempt to make the case that recipients who lose benefits only do so because the income from their forced labor puts them over the threshold of safety net programs. Not only is there little evidence to support this idea, but there are analyses pointing to the opposite. For example, one analysis found that most people losing SNAP benefits due to work requirements are [those facing the largest barriers to work](#) (and therefore, the least likely to be able to earn enough to exceed the income limits).

**However, to make matters worse, work requirements actively punish people who are, in fact, working, and create conditions where they are less likely to be (continually) employed.** To begin with, many working people with unpredictable schedules or those temporarily between jobs [wind up losing their benefits](#) due to the strict demands of these work requirements, or even simply due to the red tape associated with work requirements. For example, poor sales may result in retail workers being called in for fewer hours than scheduled. And although workers were scheduled for and wanted to work more, they may lose benefits because their employer cut their hours last minute and now their hours don't meet the work hour requirements.

And in a vicious circle, losing essential benefits only [makes it harder to find and sustain employment](#). For example, Medicaid allows people with chronic illnesses, like diabetes, to manage their conditions with medication and regular care — which in turn can help people [retain jobs or find new ones](#).



Moreover, the burdensome compliance demands of work requirements themselves impose significant “cognitive costs” to participants. Having to adhere to the often maze-like administrative requirements (paperwork, regular reporting, completion of required hours in work training and compliance tasks) [takes both time and cognitive bandwidth away](#) from people who could otherwise be finding opportunities or gaining skills.

Finally, the negative effects of work requirements on employment and poverty are felt disproportionately by people of color and further widen existing racial disparities. To begin with, Black participants in programs like TANF are [far more likely](#) to have their benefits taken away for not demonstrating compliance with work requirements. This compounds the already racially disparate effect of removing participants from economic security programs. Programs like TANF, SNAP and Medicaid have [played a significant role](#) in attenuating the disproportionate levels of poverty in communities of color. Therefore, the predictable loss of benefits due to implementing work requirements particularly exacerbates poverty for people of color.

## Macroeconomic Outcomes

Work requirements undermine the positive impact of benefits programs by shifting costs, worsening economic downturns, and hurting businesses.

**Taking away benefits from families, particularly cash benefits such as TANF, comes at an enormous cost to society.** One analysis shows that every dollar in TANF cash assistance lost to families per year [would cost society \\$8 in turn](#). These costs come in the form of increased spending on the worsened health of families, increased expenditures by the child welfare system, lost tax revenues due to worse employment outcomes, etc. The study shows a staggering cost to American society: if 25 percent of families affected by a work requirement were to lose their benefits, [the economic costs could total \\$7.4 billion per year](#). Contrast this to \$1.6 billion, [which is 25 percent TANF dollars spent on cash assistance](#). The cost-benefit analysis clearly tips on one side.

The research on [long-term effects](#) of investing in our children through public benefits programs adds further context on why these numbers might even be underestimations. Abundant evidence demonstrates that income support programs can reduce the rates of child poverty. Cash supports for families [lead to](#) better birth outcomes, greater educational attainment, and improved overall health. Research also shows that this assistance [reduces child welfare system involvement](#), lowering the risk of children being separated from their families. Certainly losing all these gains in child well-being and long-term success adds further to the social costs of limiting access to critical social supports.

**Getting rid of work requirements is also a matter of good fiscal policy.** For example, the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has concluded that SNAP participation not only has [stabilizing effects on the economy](#) during recessions, but also actively stimulates the economy during downturns. Specifically, by supplementing lowered household spending during downturns, SNAP [augments the incomes and spending of many others](#), ranging from farmers to businesses such as retailers and food distributors. In effect, SNAP acts as an effective fiscal stimulus during periods of recession. As an extension, researchers argue that since most benefit recipients are highly responsive to changes in temporary income (as they’re most likely to immediately spend cash to meet their needs), [changes to benefits will have a disproportionately strong economic effect](#). This means raising levels of general benefits spending during recessions can act as a particularly powerful form of targeted fiscal stimulus compared to other options.

## Case Study: The National Welfare Rights Organization

The women leaders of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) firmly believed that they should not have to choose between destitution or leaving their children for exploitative work. In the late 1950s and 1960s, local groups of Black, brown and white mothers who received cash assistance from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) started organizing for welfare protections and higher benefits. In 1967, local welfare rights groups formed the NWRO. Though George Wiley was the first executive director of the NWRO, Black women held leadership positions. These radical women challenged racial and patriarchal norms of the day, which characterized Black women-led families as “pathological” and questioned Black women’s [deservingness of public assistance](#). Instead, the NWRO affirmed that Black and other single mothers were worthy of adequate public resources to take care of their families [without government control](#) over their work or private lives.

The NWRO stood on the front lines against the oncoming wave of modern federal work requirements. They challenged Congress’ 1967 Work Incentive Program (WIN) for mothers receiving AFDC, calling it coercive and useless.<sup>1</sup> WIN established requirements for states to refer mothers with school-age children to job training or employment. Recipients could lose some of their benefits for not meeting the WIN obligations. In opposition to WIN, NWRO held a “Mothers’ March” in downtown Washington D.C. and later brought 50 AFDC mothers, many with children in tow, to a Senate hearing on the legislation. Most senators did not initially show up to the committee hearing. The mothers staged a three-hour sit-in demanding all 17 senators be present. Though the measure ultimately passed, [a 1977 study](#) ultimately found the WIN program ineffective.

However, there was disagreement about work within the NWRO. While many of the male leadership, including executive director George Wiley, were against mandatory work obligations, they still saw employment as the pathway out of poverty. The women NWRO members critiqued the fundamental premise that employment meant economic security as many cash assistance recipients had worked low-paid jobs and were still unable to make ends meet. Some mothers worked and received cash assistance because neither wages nor benefits were enough on their own. NWRO mothers stated clearly, “having a job is no guarantee against poverty.”<sup>2</sup> They believed caring for children was work and they should have autonomy on how they decided to take care of their children.<sup>3</sup>

In 1969, President Nixon included work obligations in his proposed basic income program, Family Assistance Program (FAP). The FAP proposed replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children with a basic income of about \$1,600 a year to supplement income for a family of four. Beulah Sanders, one of the founders of the NWRO, stated in a 1969 U.S. House Ways and Means Committee hearing on the FAP, “Surely the mother is in the best position to know what effect her taking a particular job would have on her young school child, but now we are told that for welfare mothers the choice will be made for them.”<sup>4</sup>

Instead of the FAP’s work requirements, the women leaders of the NWRO laid out a vision that guaranteed basic income should not be a supplement to earnings but high enough to support decent living standards regardless of work.<sup>5</sup> The NWRO’s Guaranteed Adequate Income (GAI) proposal was introduced in Congress in 1970. It had much higher benefits (\$5,500 annually for a family of 4) and [without any work obligation](#). Even present-day guaranteed income programs do not offer the level of benefits as the NWRO’s proposal when considering inflation. While neither Nixon’s nor the NWRO’s basic income proposals passed, the work of the larger welfare rights movement granted many Black and brown mothers access to cash assistance for the first time.

## Government Spending

Work requirements increase wasteful spending with nothing to show for it.

**The immense spending it takes to implement the bureaucratic processes needed to implement and enforce work requirements is often overlooked.** In 2019, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) analyzed [administrative costs](#) in implementing Medicaid work requirements over a three-year period. They found that taxpayers had paid nearly [\\$408 million for implementation — in just five states](#). These costs did not include the use of non-Medicaid funds for implementing work requirements — the painful irony being that [TANF dollars were slated to cover some of these costs](#). The GAO also raised concerns about a [lack of oversight](#) and warned of several ways in which these costs may have violated agency guidance.

**Lessons from state implementation also show concerning purposes for these appropriations.** For example, in implementing Iowa's work requirements for SNAP, the legislature allowed funding for [incentives to administrators to remove more lowans](#) from program participation. Such perverse incentives certainly magnify the social costs of each dollar spent on enforcing work requirements.

### Case Study: Arkansas

In early 2018 the Trump administration encouraged states to implement work requirements in their Medicaid programs by using a state flexibility tool – a Section 1115 waiver, which allows states to operate Medicaid outside its typical rules. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) subsequently approved a Section 1115 waiver adopting work requirements for certain Medicaid populations in 13 states. Of those 13 states, only Arkansas implemented their waiver program and [disenrolled people for noncompliance](#). Court rulings and second thoughts by states after seeing data from Arkansas prevented any other state from implementing or following through on disenrollments.

The outcomes in Arkansas clearly show that work requirements create administrative burden, do not lead to greater employment, and end up harming people who are either complying with the policy or should be exempt. In the 10 months Arkansas implemented their work requirement program (June 2018 through March 2019),

- [More than 18,000 Arkansans lost Medicaid coverage](#). This was about one quarter of everyone subject to the work requirement.
- The loss of Medicaid coverage had [devastating effects](#):
  - 50 percent reported serious problems paying off medical bills;
  - 56 percent delayed seeking health care because of costs; and
  - 64 percent delayed taking medications because of cost.
- Employment [did not increase](#) for the target population.
- Persons with disabilities were particularly vulnerable to losing Medicaid, even though [safeguards were supposed to be in place](#) to exempt them from the work requirement.

Arkansas' work requirement was stopped in March 2019 by a federal court ruling. Implementation of work requirements in other states was halted by additional court rulings. In 2021, the Biden administration [rescinded all](#) Medicaid work requirement waivers.



**Ultimately, the broader savings through reduced enrollment that are touted through imposing work requirements are yet to see rigorous verification.** Firstly, those estimates rarely account for the shifted social costs outlined in the previous argument. Secondly, even some direct costs often go unaccounted for, such as Medicaid offsetting uncompensated care costs that [state budgets](#) would otherwise end up assuming (if they opt out of Medicaid, as several states still do). If any savings are still to be claimed, they come solely off the backs of otherwise eligible recipients who have been unjustly denied benefits.

The economic argument against work requirements presents a thorough indictment of this purported “welfare-to-work” tactic. Such requirements hurt economic objectives that all stakeholders supposedly care about — helping people get jobs and keep them, increasing racial and gender income equity, reducing poverty amongst children and people with disabilities, adding cushion to all Americans during our worst economic downturns, and cutting down wasteful government spending. It is time to abandon this policy.



## The Narratives that Fuel the Work Requirements Obsession

We define narratives as our cultural understandings, frames of reference, or mental models. They play a significant role in how leaders create and implement policies, and how Americans receive them.

We all use narratives to make sense of the world and help us create order. They determine the extent to which we build empathy and who we see as deserving of support. They also play a significant role in policymaking and politicians and policymakers call on narratives to create and define policy.

Work requirements are based on a number of deeply problematic truths about the U.S.: An inability to lead by fact rather than fiction, a deep history of racism and sexism and a Protestant work ethic/late-stage capitalism that views people's purpose in life as cogs in a productivity machine. There are a number of problems with this approach: you're entitled to your own opinions, but not your own set of facts. The fact is, work requirements don't work. This has already been well-documented in the previous section. It's also necessary to interrogate the reason *why* we believe these things. Well, it's the result of a centuries-long campaign in this country to demonize Black women. One of the most effective ways we've done this is through the creation of false and dehumanizing narratives about who Black women are and what they deserve. In particular, work requirements are driven by a belief that Black women are lazy, and will not work unless they are forced to do so, and by mistrust of their ability to make good choices for themselves and their families. These narratives work to justify the continued devaluation of Black people and play a significant role in how our economy is set up.

Work requirements attached to public benefits are ineffective and lead to harmful consequences, with a historical lineage that underscores the racist and sexist ideologies and narratives inherently embedded within them.

## A Long and Shameful History

To truly understand the narrative roots of work requirements, one must trace them back to the dark legacy of chattel slavery in the United States. During slavery, Black people were forced into labor without any choice or compensation, and this brutal system has left a lasting impact on how society perceives and manages Black people's labor and worth. The exploitation of Black labor during this period laid the groundwork for future systems of economic inequality and the ongoing devaluation of the work and lives of Black Americans.

[The history of the Widow's Pension](#), established in the late 19th century for families of Civil War soldiers, is critical foundational knowledge. It was one of the earliest forms of public assistance in the United States, aimed primarily at white women who had lost their husbands. This early social welfare program was racially discriminatory, purposefully excluding Black women and perpetuating disparities in access to economic support that have yet to be eradicated from our social safety net. Black women were wrongfully denied this benefit because they were not seen as deserving in comparison to their white women peers, a narrative thread that continues throughout U.S. history.

The post-Civil War era, particularly during the Reconstruction period, witnessed the inception of the restaurant industry. While seemingly unrelated, the restaurant industry's development is intertwined with the exploitation of Black labor. It became one of the first industries to employ newly freed Black people, especially Black women. Instead of paying them, [employers forced them to rely on tips from patrons](#) — a continuation of the exploitation of Black labor. This early example of devaluing Black labor contributed to the broader narrative that the work of Black individuals is not worth the same as other workers, perpetuating racial discrimination and economic disparities.

Heather McGhee, in her insightful work, highlighted the [unfortunate shift in societal attitudes](#) toward federal investments in the public good when Black Americans and other people of color began to benefit from them in the wake of the Civil Rights era. This transformation in public perception led to a decline in investment in social safety net programs, with many policymakers and citizens wrongly associating welfare with racist stereotypes and sexist assumptions.

This shift laid the foundation for [the “welfare queen” myth](#), a harmful stereotype perpetuated during the Reagan era. The welfare queen myth falsely portrayed Black women as abusing the welfare system, stigmatizing and undermining the legitimate need for public assistance (white Americans have always been [the biggest recipients](#) of welfare).

In addition, one of the primary narratives fueling the obsession with work requirements is the trope of Black laziness. Again, this stereotype is [rooted in slavery](#) and the racist belief that Black people must be forced to work. This anti-blackness [clearly still shapes](#) the debate around work requirements, and eradicating the idea that social safety net recipients are lazy will benefit Black Americans as well as all people accessing public benefits.

The history of work requirements tied to public benefits reveals a deeply rooted legacy of racism and sexism in American society. From the exploitation of Black labor during slavery to the racial discrimination within early welfare programs and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, these policies have consistently disadvantaged Black women and other marginalized communities. Acknowledging this history is essential for dismantling these harmful policies — particularly as [conservative leaders continue their crusade](#) to punish the poor with them — and working toward a more equitable and just welfare system that recognizes the unique challenges faced by Black women and other marginalized groups.

## Case Study: Greenville Ordinance and Work Expectations of Black Wives of WWI Service Members

During World War I, the wives of white and Black soldiers serving in war received monthly allowances from the federal government. Many Black women found that sum sufficient to care for themselves and their children without having to work. In Greenville, South Carolina, Black women's newly found economic autonomy was not welcomed by the white community.

The Greenville city council [heard complaints](#) from white employers of “negro women who are not at work and refuse employment when it is offered them, the result being that it is exceedingly difficult for [white] families who need cooks and laundresses to get them.” White Greenville residents defamed Black women calling them “unpatriotic loafers” [and claimed](#) many Black women were turning to prostitution instead of working in white homes.

In response, the Greenville city council members considered an ordinance that would have required Black women “to carry a labor identification card showing that they are regularly and usefully employed” five days a week.<sup>6</sup> Black women caught without this ID would have been jailed or fined. Wrightsville, Georgia had [a similar](#) coercive work policy.

The Greenville Black community organized and protested the discriminatory policy and defamation. Though privately complaining about the loss of Black women workers in their own homes, Greenville's white city council ultimately did not implement the ordinance.<sup>7</sup> However, the degrading and racist narratives that were perpetuated about Black women continue to have everlasting effects and are continually used today to justify a punitive social welfare program.

As Elisa Minoff outlines in her report “The Racist Roots of Work Requirements,” President Bill Clinton's welfare reform in the 1990s [further perpetuated these harmful narratives](#). While aimed at reducing welfare dependency, it lacked a nuanced understanding of the complex reasons individuals access public assistance. The reform imposed strict work requirements and time limits on welfare benefits, pushing many recipients into precarious employment situations and increasing their vulnerability. This policy not only failed to address the root causes of poverty but also perpetuated racial and gender disparities, as Black women bore a disproportionate burden of its negative consequences.

## Case Study: The Battle of Newburgh

Throughout the early and mid-20th century, Southern states tried different strategies to keep Black families off their cash assistance programs. Because the Southern economy relied on the exploitation of Black labor, Southern states' ADC/AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) programs [often found ways to coerce](#) work instead of providing assistance to poor Black families. Yet this practice was not limited to the South. In 1961, the city of Newburgh, New York became the epicenter of a national dialogue about public benefits and work.

Between the 1940s and 1960s, Newburgh experienced dramatic demographic and economic shifts. This was the period of the second Great Migration where [many Black individuals and families](#) left the rural South to escape Jim Crow laws and for economic opportunities in the North, Midwest and West. [Many Black people moved to Newburgh](#), mainly from North Carolina, to work in farms around the city or in the city's hotels and ferries. At the same time, the decline of wartime industry and the rise of suburbanization in the late 1940s and 1950s led many white residents and businesses to move out of the city causing [a major collapse](#) of the city's tax base.

Newburgh city leaders used Black migrants as the scapegoat for the city's hardship. They claimed Black migrants traveled to Newburgh for generous welfare payments and in doing so brought down the city's economy. The city council hired Joseph Mitchell as the city manager in 1960 and produced a report indicating that Black migrants to the city were the source of the city's growing welfare costs. In 1961, the city council adopted Mitchell's 13-point plan for public assistance, which included requirements for non-disabled men receiving public assistance to work for the city's maintenance department, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) mothers to be kicked off assistance if they had a child outside of marriage, and all public benefit applicants who were new to Newburgh [to provide evidence](#) that they had a concrete offer of employment.

In reality, the evidence did not show a massive welfare problem in Newburgh and certainly not one caused by Black residents. Very few of the city's residents received ADC or other public benefits and most of those who did were white. There were no new Newburgh arrivals on the city's public benefit rolls in 1960 and the city found [no incidents](#) of fraud.

In defending the plan, Mitchell [utilized much of the same racist rhetoric](#) popularized by President Ronald Reagan more than a decade later. He stated "We challenge the right of a welfare program to contribute to the rise of slums, to the rise of illegitimacy, to the rise of social diseases among children and adults. We challenge the right of chiselers and loafers to squat on the relief rolls forever...We challenge the right of a welfare program to contribute...to emptying the city of responsible tax paying citizens and filling it with those who create and contribute to crime and violence..."

Though the state supreme court blocked Newburgh's 13-point plan in 1961, the controversy gained national attention and raised the specter of a growing welfare crisis. Other northern localities adopted similar measures or [tried to require recipients](#) to work after perceiving more Black people were moving into their towns. The episode also got the attention of federal lawmakers, and in 1967, they passed the first federal work registration policy for the newly named Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC; in 1962 Congress changed the name of ADC to AFDC) recipients. The law signaled many federal legislators' belief that a mother's primary role should not be as caregiver to their children, but as workers outside the home.



## Harmful Narratives Continue to Put Parents in Impossible Situations Today

Today, the legacy of these narratives and policies continues to affect Black women and other marginalized communities by extension. Work requirements attached to public benefits often ignore the structural barriers that many individuals face, such as systemic racism, sexism, and limited access to quality education and employment opportunities. They fail to acknowledge the caregiving responsibilities that disproportionately fall on Black women, making it difficult for them to comply with these requirements.

For example, one mother in Mississippi — [a state embroiled in a TANF corruption scandal](#) involving white leaders funneling nearly \$100 million in welfare funds to their own pet projects — described to state leaders the barriers that work requirements created to finding decent employment: “TANF is supposed to help us find jobs, but if you don’t find a job within a week of being in the program, you’re stuck spending hours at DHS offices to fulfill volunteer hours. You’re basically exchanging your body to sit or file papers at the office for less than minimum wage. That’s not career development. That’s called being stuck in limbo.”

Another woman in Mississippi told staff of the Maven Collaborative that work requirements had forced her into an impossible situation, with no child care for her child. She relied on keeping her benefits to keep food on the table and a roof over the head of her family. Living in a childcare desert, she was desperate and distraught and made the excruciating decision to drop her child at Walmart during the day because it had security guards, a bathroom and inexpensive food for purchase. Another woman shared a story of children being locked in a room in the absence of childcare to fulfill work requirements. These women were forced to put their children in dangerous situations because of work requirements.

Other findings from Maven’s work in the state included numerous people describing onerous work and reporting requirements for TANF and SNAP benefits. Participants shared that their access to these programs would cease without notice of denial, particularly if one of the several work reporting requirements were not done perfectly. Benefits are not received without these requirements being fulfilled. Numerous participants reported waiting weeks to apply for benefits and receive approval or denial, as well as difficulty in obtaining work requirement signatures from supervisors (due to supervisor absence, unwillingness to assist, or error) needed to receive benefits and stay enrolled.

## The Path Forward: Quality Jobs and No Strings Attached Cash

Work requirements are built on the faulty premise that any job is worth taking. But a job that doesn't pay as much as childcare costs, requires working any schedule on short notice, and doesn't offer benefits simply cannot fulfill the goal of helping people escape poverty. The distinction between "any job" and a "good job" lies in various factors that go beyond mere employment. We should be creating an economy where all jobs have the following:

- **Income Stability:** Good jobs offer consistent and reliable income. Workers with steady schedules and salaries can better plan their finances, meet essential expenses, and save for the future. In contrast, irregular hours or unpredictable incomes associated with having to take any job to fulfill a bureaucratic requirement can [lead to financial instability and insecurity](#).
- **Benefits For Full and Part-Time Work:** Good jobs come with essential benefits such as health insurance, paid time off, reti

rement contributions, and access to other resources that support overall well-being. Benefits like health insurance are especially critical, as they provide a safety net for healthcare costs, promoting better physical and mental health among workers and their families. Low-income families, those subject to work requirements, [rarely have access](#) to benefits as meager as paid leave.

- **Balanced, Healthy Lives:** Steady schedules and paid time off contribute to a [healthier life balance](#). Workers in good jobs have the opportunity to spend more time with their families, pursue education, and engage in leisure activities, ultimately leading to increased job satisfaction and overall quality of life. Conservative leaders tout being the party of family values, yet fail to recognize work requirements [keep families apart](#).
- **Career Advancement:** Good jobs provide opportunities for skill development and career advancement. Steady employment allows workers to build experience and expertise in their chosen fields, enhancing their long-term career prospects and earning potential. Without economic mobility, families — particularly [Black and brown families](#) — are left stuck in the cycle of intergenerational poverty.
- **Egalitarian Profit Sharing:** Low-wage workers often face job insecurity and stagnant salaries, while high-profit corporations continue to enjoy significant financial gains. The United Autoworkers Strike in September of 2023 [provides a clear illustration](#), with workers walking off the job to protest the fact their wage increases were one-tenth the amount of soaring profit their employers enjoyed during the same time period.

As opposed to work requirements that force people into terrible jobs and bureaucratic red tape, cash-based social safety net policies offer several significant advantages in addressing poverty and providing support to those in need. Cash-based policies surpass programs with work requirements in several ways, including:

- They are more flexible and responsive to individual circumstances. They recognize that the barriers to employment can vary widely among individuals and communities. Cash assistance allows recipients to use the funds according to their most pressing needs — whether it's paying rent, buying groceries, covering medical expenses, or investing in education and job training. In contrast, work requirements and excessive bureaucracy often impose one-size-fits-all solutions that fail to account for the unique challenges individuals face.
- They are administratively efficient. They reduce the administrative burden on both recipients and

government agencies, [leading to cost savings](#). This efficiency means that more of the allocated funds go directly to those in need, rather than being spent on administration and compliance monitoring, which is often the case with work requirements and complex eligibility criteria.

- They respect individual dignity and autonomy and are narrative disrupters. They empower recipients to make choices that align with their personal goals and priorities. This empowerment not only preserves recipients' agency but also recognizes their expertise in determining what is most beneficial for their well-being. They also uplift a narrative that Black and brown people and people living in poverty are trustworthy and able to make the best decisions for their families. This goes a long way in disrupting the harmful narratives we currently have.
- They're effective. Not only are cash-based policies responsible for the largest drop in poverty the United States has ever experienced, but they also have a significant return on investment: [researchers found](#) that the expanded Child Tax Credit offered 10 times the return on its investment and that any program offering the same cash value would have similar effects.

Cash-based policies in the social safety net offer greater flexibility, efficiency, dignity, and economic benefits compared to rigid work requirements and excessive red tape. They acknowledge the diverse circumstances of individuals and communities and provide a more effective means of reducing poverty and supporting those facing economic hardship.

Cash-based policies have already been adopted at various levels of government, including 2021's expanded Child Tax Credit, which reduced child poverty [by nearly half](#) and provided an especially positive impact on Black and brown children, who are more likely to live in poverty due to systemic racism. [Reallocated TANF funds](#) in Michigan will be used to support a guaranteed income program for newborns, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development is [exploring a shift](#) from difficult-to-use housing vouchers to cash.



## Conclusion

There is ample research that affirms that work requirements are indeed trash. This publication is just another to add to the growing work of advocates who know this truth and are tirelessly moving to eradicate work requirements from our social safety net programs for good.

Ultimately, we need a new vision for our social safety net — one that is built on trust and affirms that every person deserves to have their very basic needs met just because they are human. We need to let go of tired and unjust narratives that exacerbate racial and gender injustice and follow the lead of Black women who have, for decades, been fighting to be seen and valued — not demonized and punished.

An important step toward this larger goal is to call work requirements what they are — racist and counterproductive to creating a thriving economy, and therefore eliminated from all social welfare policy conversations.

Let's be bold and vision for a future where we no longer make the choice to accept that poverty should exist, and instead equip people with what they need to participate fully in our economy — unconditional cash, universal health care, paid leave and quality, affordable childcare and housing. With our eyes on that prize, it's time to put work requirements in the trash bin and move onto ideas and solutions that actually work.

# Endnotes

- 1 Premilla Nadasen, Jennifer Mittelstadt, and Marisa Chappell, *Welfare in the United States: A History with Documents, 1935-1996*, Routledge, 2009, p. 34-35.  
Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present*, Routledge, 2018, p. 260-261.
- 2 Premilla Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement*. Routledge, 2012, p. 45-48.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*, Routledge, 2005, p. 178-179.
- 5 This was not a position held by George Wiley, the first executive director of the NWRO, who believed there should be a work incentive for mothers with older children. Premilla Nadasen, p. 179.
- 6 Greenville News, 1918; Hudson, 2009, p. 114.
- 7 Hudson, 2009, p. 115.



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