

Maureen McHugh's paper was composed in Spring 2006 for Honors 391D. It contains the abstract composed after substantial research has been done and submitted before a presentation is made, as well as the literature review and reflection called for in 391D.

## Federal Welfare Reform: A Critical Perspective

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### Abstract

This project will examine “welfare reform,” which was signified by the signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA) in 1996. PRWOA replaced the original welfare act of 1935, titled Aid to Dependent Children (later changed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children), with the program Temporary Assistance to needy Families (TANF). Under PRWOA, TANF was instated as a system of block grants allocated to states to implement their own forms of assistance and replaced programs like the cash-assistance program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training. The most influential change of this legislation among others has been the implementation of required work hours and strict time limits to how long families may receive assistance. While the significant fall of TANF cash assistance caseloads within the program’s first five years has been celebrated as proof of reform’s success, the new era of welfare can only be considered a success if America views the transformation of the welfare poor to the poor an achievement.

Cites all sources that fit this assertion and separates entries with semicolons.

Review is composed in the style of an expository essay with an introduction, discussion, and conclusion.

### Review of the Literature

It is interesting to note the dramatically divergent perspectives presented in the literature on the topic of welfare reform, especially considering that most experts gave the impression their arguments were based on quantitative facts (Administration; Fremstad; Goldberg; Shipler; White House). The sources affiliated with the federal government, such as statistics and fact sheets from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) as well as the White House website, are generally the most optimistic about welfare reform. The objective information provided by these sources lies in that it outlines many specifications of welfare reform such as the details of work requirements, time limits, funding, and penalties. Yet, by focusing exclusively on the decline in TANF caseloads, welfare reform is portrayed as a wild success that has allowed families to “move from dependence on welfare to greater independence through work” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). These sources talk extensively about “empowerment,” “protection,” and “independence” as related to work, welfare reform, and its reauthorization. They emphasize a “national” interest in spending cuts which they assume to be exclusive from the interests of the nation’s poor.

Establishes categories or sets of sources based on observed commonalities and differences.

Defines major points of agreement and disagreement between sets of sources.

Sources unaffiliated with the government either contradict or conflict with government affiliated analyses of welfare reform’s success in one way or another. Instead of focusing on the decline in TANF caseloads, these sources look critically and holistically at welfare reform and its effect on individuals and families (Fremstad; Melendez; Goldberg). Instead of an analysis with the removal of recipients from the welfare roles, Fremstad, for example, examines the long term consequences of removal in terms of poverty, remaining barriers to employment such as disability or childcare, and the effects of reduced educational capital. In emphasizing these aspects of

Notes sources making unique contributions or claims.

welfare reform’s impact, the author reaches dramatically different conclusions from those reached by government-affiliated sources. Fremstad, Melendez, and Goldberg all argue that the decline in TANF recipients has been mistakenly assumed to be associated with a decline in poverty and an increase in “opportunity.” Furthermore, they question the very taken-for-granted outcome definitions of the program’s success where the emphasis is on finding a job— any job, regardless of low wages.

Aside from emphasis, there are subtle but noticeable differences in the language used by each set of sources to describe TANF recipients. By focusing on the term “dependent” to describe TANF recipients, the government sources tend to propagate negative stereotypes and assumptions about the poor. In contrast, the other sources focus more on individual circumstances and the persistent challenges the welfare poor must face despite the aid that they receive. The government sources attempt to indicate that welfare recipients of the past have felt unjustifiably that they are entitled to aid whereas the other sources portray recipients as legitimately in need.

An explanation for the dramatic differences between government and non-government affiliated sources can be assumed by briefly examining the role or mission of these two sectors in welfare reform. Considering that welfare reform is a government policy, it is not surprising that government related sources hesitate to be critical of their own initiatives. Through emphasis of only selective data, particularly the decline in TANF caseloads and reliance on stereotypes to garner public support for reform, these sources ultimately contort the policy’s affects without ever actually lying. On the other hand, the mission of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is to advocate for “fiscal policy and public programs that affect low– and moderate–income families and individuals. Considering that both groups of sources have a vested interest in the outcome of welfare reform, neither can be regarded as entirely objective. Still, for the purposes of my presentation and especially in the context of Shieler’s *The Working Poor*, I have chosen to rely on non-government sources, though I found that contrasting the two both enriched and enhanced my project.

### Discussion and Reflection

In his book *The Working Poor*, Shieler states, “how to define the individual’s role in poverty is a question that has shaped the debate about welfare and other social policies but it can rarely be answered with certainty, even in a specific case.” The characters he explores in the text are a testament to his assertion. Can you really blame a person for their inability to overcome systemic issues in the form of racism, abuse, or segregated education? What I appreciate about Shieler is that he does not rule out the individual’s role in her own poverty. In fact, he includes many examples of individuals contributing to their own poverty through bad financial decisions and apathy. Still, his analysis does not taint his well crafted argument that there is more to poverty than individual choices.

As well as reviewing, summarizing & comparing sources also evaluates & critiques them.

Moves focus to discussion of text and issues, now using sources for support.

It is interesting to juxtapose Shieler’s nuanced and detailed analysis with the comparatively one-dimensional solution to poverty as purported by welfare reform. The emphasis on American success as related to the efforts of the individual, a myth that has its roots in early Puritanism, is expressed clearly in the very name of the latest welfare reform act: the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. While Shieler maintains that personal choice and responsibility is one small aspect of poverty in America, PRWOA’s policy initiatives target this small aspect as if it were the exclusive factor contributing to poverty, either ignoring systemic issues or imposing them on already burdened individuals. PRWOA’s additional work requirement is the clearest example of this imposition. The work requirement relies on the idea that a person can simply work their way out of poverty with little regard for the barriers that keep them out of the work force.

in the first place. In its focus on self-motivated success, the system fails to address poverty and aid dependency in reference to these barriers to the disadvantage of many (Goldberg).

With such little regard for individual circumstance, the American myth of success, expressing itself through welfare reform quickly and easily lends itself to sweeping generalizations about the nature of those who are unable to succeed in the system. Although the characters explored in *The Working Poor* reveal that most aid recipients were optimistic and determined to become independent of state aid and had legitimately pursued job options, public perception of the welfare recipient as a hustler, liberally exploiting good taxpayers' hard-earned money dominates, and influences public policy as evident in PRWOA.

In conclusion, while many of America's poor are in fact leaving the ranks of welfare behind, they are not necessarily taking with them the skills, income, or jobs that promote self-sufficiency. De-emphasis on education in the TANF is one crucial element that is certain to continually hold back the poor. Situations of how often and under what circumstances school time can be counted as work hours are left entirely up to the discretion of individual states, and therefore TANF recipients have different experiences and opportunities depending on their geography. Community colleges have stepped up since welfare reform to quickly restructure academic programs that will fit the often narrow margin of time and funding in which states will allow TANF recipients to participate, but it continues to present a challenge. In general, community colleges have been eager to respond to the needs of TANF students, often assuming many of the functions previously reserved for the government or community based social agencies such as childcare, substance abuse counseling, transportation, and a wide variety of programs targeted at assessed student needs (Melendez 219). Yet, it must be kept in mind that these additional programs are a response to the important and inexcusable loss of government programs and only affect the 6 percent of TANF recipients who are also community college students (Melendez 210). It is TANF's marginalization of education in deference to its centralization of "jobs" and its ignorance of systemic barriers as explored by Shipler that is making individual's transition from welfare to work truly unexceptional by only perpetuating poverty.

#### Works Cited

Includes works cited list in MLA style.

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