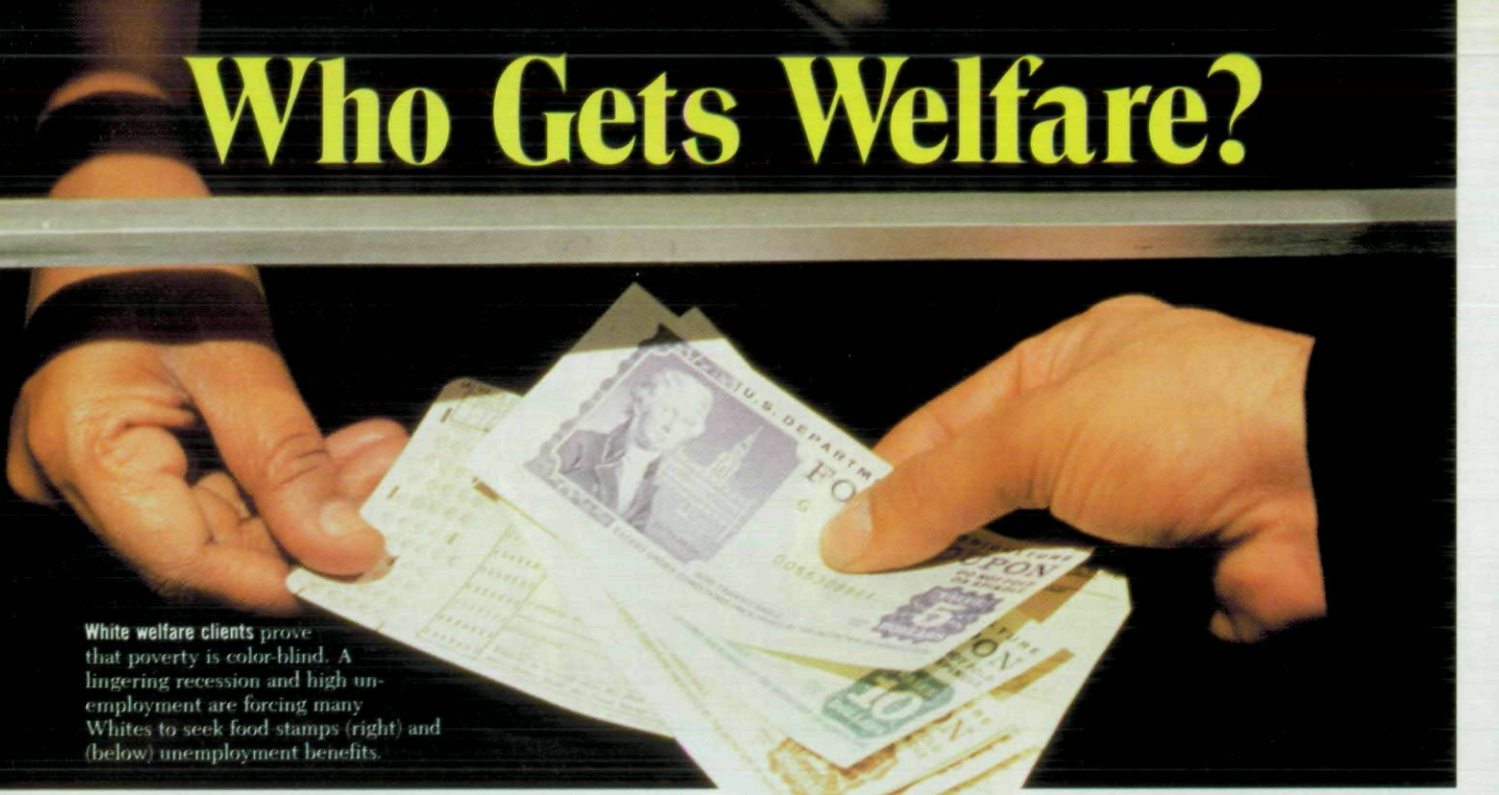


Who Gets Welfare?



White welfare clients prove that poverty is color-blind. A lingering recession and high unemployment are forcing many Whites to seek food stamps (right) and (below) unemployment benefits.

Despite prevailing stereotype, Whites, not Blacks, collect greatest share of public aid dollars

SAY the word "welfare" and immediately the image of the lazy Black welfare queen who breeds for profit surfaces in the minds of those who have come to believe the hideous stereotype. It is a myth that persists despite government figures and authoritative studies

showing that Whites overwhelmingly reap the lion's share of the dole.

The image of the Black "welfare cheat," public aid advocates say, is based on misconceptions about poor minorities. The notion, they say, comes from society's resentment of seemingly able-bodied people getting paid for doing nothing.

"For some people, there is a need to believe that there are professional welfare recipients who are deliberately trying to get not only what they need to survive, but more," says Anne D. Hill, director of programs for the National Urban League. "People say to themselves: 'I work. How come this person who appears to be healthy isn't working?' We tend to equate our condition with others

without fully knowing their circumstances."

Hill and other welfare supporters argue that numbers, and not erroneous stereotypes, tell the *real* story about public assistance clients: Some 61 percent of welfare recipients are White, while 33 percent are Black, according to 1990 Census Bureau statistics, the latest figures available.

The federal government defines welfare as all entitlement programs funded through taxes. These programs, listed as "direct benefit payments for individuals" by the Office of Management and Budget, make up \$730 billion or 43 percent of the \$1.47 trillion the government will spend this fiscal year.

Social Security is the nation's largest welfare program, although many Whites prefer to call it a retirement plan. The government writes retirement and disability benefit checks to 35.4 million recipients of whom 88.7 percent are White and 9.6 percent are Black. The reason behind this shocking disparity is perhaps the most lamentable of all: The life expectancy rate for Blacks is six years shorter than that of Whites, meaning Black workers spend years paying into a retirement system only to have White retirees reap the benefits for a longer time.

Welfare critics rarely search the Social Security rolls for "welfare cheats," but train their sights on people getting Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Medicaid and food stamps, the relief programs with the most Black clients. Yet government figures show that



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Program	Recipients	Black	White
Social Security retirement and survivors insurance	35.4 million	9.6%	88.7%
Medicare	31.4 million	10.3%*	86.3%
Veterans disability	1.57 million	10.0%	83.0%
Supplemental security income	4.8 million	24.2%	50.4%
Aid to families with dependent children	3.97 million	39.7%	38.1%
Food stamps	25.4 million	37.2%	46.2%
Medicaid	26.5 million	27.5%	48.5%
Public housing	2.75 million	50.0%	29.0%
Educational aid	11.2 million	56.7%	32.0%**
Unemployment insurance	1.9 million	12.6%	65.1%***

*Identified as "Non-White" recipients of Medicare.

**More Blacks applied for financial aid than Whites, however aid awards were similar in amount.

***Figures reflect data reported by 45 states in month of May 1989, the latest data available.

Source: U.S. Government

WELFARE *Continued*

Whites not Blacks make up the bulk of clients on these public aid programs; a fact that dispels the notion that Blacks are scheming for a free lunch courtesy of the American taxpayer.

Among the poorest of the poor—single mothers, living below the poverty line with minor children to support—39.7 percent of AFDC clients are Black single mothers and 38.1 percent are White women with children. Food stamp recipients are 37.2 percent Black and 46.2 percent White. Medicaid benefits are paid to 27.5 percent Black recipients compared to 48.5 percent White clients.

Although the numbers show that Whites get the biggest chunk of public aid dollars, welfare critics still charge that Blacks shouldn't collect 33 percent of welfare benefits when they only make up 12 percent of the general population. They say the imbalance proves their

case that Blacks are too busy complaining and blaming racism for their plight to look for a job.

But racism *is* at the heart of the standard-of-living gap between Blacks and Whites, welfare advocates argue. Unlawful race-based hiring practices, they contend, keep Blacks from getting jobs that pay enough to lift them out of poverty. Until more blue-collar jobs open up to Black workers, Blacks will continue to battle poverty and the free-loader misconception.

"Public and congressional deliberations over . . . welfare reform in the last few years have been fueled by distortions and outright falsehoods about poverty," the National Urban League asserted in its 1988 report, *Black Americans and Public Policy*. "Welfare reform is not solely a Black issue, but one in need of immediate attention."

Turning welfare reform into a "Black issue" makes racial scapegoating easy

and allows stereotypes, like the Reagan-era "welfare queen," to go unchallenged, public aid supporters say. Right-wing reformers cast Whites as "deserving" clients who are legitimately unable to pay their own way through no fault of their own. Blacks are labeled "undeserving" recipients who are looking for the feds to subsidize their slothfulness.

Attaching a moral value to work is not a new convention; it is a philosophy deeply rooted in the religious beliefs and social welfare laws that Anglo-Saxon settlers brought to the New World. These values were imposed upon poor immigrants from other European countries who later perpetuated them after moving into mainstream society.

The Puritanical work ethic faced its greatest challenge following the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression of the 1930s. The nation was forced to re-think its social welfare con-



A White mother said her family was driven onto public aid rolls (above) after a Missouri electronics manufacturing plant shut down in May 1992. Below, a health care worker chats with an elderly Medicare recipient. Some 61 percent of all welfare recipients are White, while 33 percent are Black.



WELFARE *Continued*

ventions when it realized that economic forces—not misplaced values—could lead to financial disaster. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs and the adoption of the Social Security Act of 1935 symbolized the country's commitment to protecting family and personal incomes. President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society anti-poverty programs of the 1960s ushered in some of the programs of today's welfare system.

Ironically, the social welfare policies of three decades ago are under attack today by political conservatives who have placed the blame for the recent Los Angeles riots on the "failed social programs of the 1960s." That characterization has drawn fire from welfare advocates and sociologists as well as ordinary citizens.

"I think that the problems of South Central Los Angeles and other urban communities are far more complex than

the simple kinds of characterizations we are getting from elected officials," says Evelyn K. Moore, executive director of the National Black Child Development Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based public policy center. "We cannot criticize family values unless we are willing to support families."

Dr. Marcus Alexis, a Northwestern University economist and former acting chairman of the federal Interstate Commerce Commission agrees. "Welfare is the new code word that's being substituted for Willie Horton," Dr. Alexis points out. "It means that inner-city Blacks are viewed as chronically poor, heavily subsidized, irresponsible, high-cost individuals. That's where the administration is coming from."

As a lingering recession and high unemployment drive more Whites onto relief rolls, welfare reformers are going to have to pin the blame on the economy and not "immoral" poor people in the na-

tion's inner cities. They only need to look at the White families streaming into welfare offices in rural New Hampshire for proof that poverty has more to do with economics than race. The once-thriving state has seen an 88 percent jump in welfare cases since 1989, yet the state's Black population is a meager 0.6 percent.

The economic slump has created a social welfare crisis: Some 13.5 million Americans are on welfare, 2.2 million more than two years ago. That means that one in seven American children is on relief with about 2,000 more joining their ranks every day.

Congress could not have anticipated a surge in welfare clients when it drafted The Family Support Act of 1988, hoping to end welfare dependency by providing educational programs and jobs for able-bodied people. These clients would eventually move into the work force and stave off the labor crunch. With flourishing local economies, states could afford to pick up part of the tab for participants' education, child care and Medicaid benefits with the balance paid by federal matching funds.

It didn't work that way. The economy ground to a near-halt in the late 1980s and many blue- and white-collar workers found themselves seeking public aid. Welfare clients took the biggest hit when state welfare officials upended their pencils and erased names from public aid rolls.

Michigan welfare officials, for example, dumped 90,000 people from its general assistance program last year to save the state \$250 million. Unfortunately, a majority of those clients, as is the case nationwide, are poor Black men living in urban areas with staggeringly high unemployment rates. Many of these men suffer from physical or mental disabilities. Without welfare benefits, they face a grim future.

The question of who gets welfare is one that society would do well to ponder. As it stands now, poor Black families are up against the burdens of systematic racism, urban warfare and limited paths leading up and out of poverty. And many working class and middle class Black families are a paycheck away from joining their poorer brothers.

The welfare question goes to the heart of individual attitudes about race, class, values and beliefs. Those judgments, often made by the powerbrokers who shape public policy, rarely coincide with the sensibilities of the poor. How they decide who gets welfare can irrevocably alter the destinies of generations of impoverished people.

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