

Work Requirements

An Advocate's Study of Harm and Coercion

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Congress recently passed massive cuts to programs like SNAP and Medicaid, and one major tool used to achieve these cuts is “work requirements.” This allows them to claim they are not making program cuts and instead frame those who cannot meet the unrealistic requirements as unwilling to work.

We’ve conducted a thorough review of how we got to where we are today with the most recent version of work requirements that just passed through Congress. And the history is grim – but incredibly important to understand in order to change the trajectory of continued harm from these restrictions.

In this piece, we will explore how harmful work requirements have long been used as a tool of coercion against marginalized populations and came to find mainstream acceptance through a decades-long campaign funded by wealthy corporations intent on a cheap and exploitable labor pool.

Work Requirements Target Subjugated Populations

Work requirements have a long history of being imposed on subjugated populations in the United States for the purpose of coercion.

In the latter half of the 19th century, after the Osage had been forcibly relocated to Oklahoma territory, the U.S. government used work requirements to force members of the tribe to assimilate into white Western society. The tribe was owed annuities after their land in Kansas was taken, but the government refused to distribute the payments owed to the tribe until “able-bodied men” took up farming in a way that resembled Western agricultural methods. Unfamiliar with such methods, the Osage could not meet the unreasonable

requirements. The payments were withheld, causing many members of the tribe to die of starvation.¹

Black and African Americans have also experienced coercion through work requirements throughout the history of this country. Prior to the abolition of slavery, refusal or inability to perform grueling work without pay often resulted in violence or death. After the abolition of slavery, policies were implemented that made it a crime not to work. Once formerly enslaved people were arrested, a loophole in the 13th Amendment banning slavery “except as a punishment for crime” allowed incarcerated persons to continue to be subjected to slavery.²

Half a century later, a program called the “Mother’s Pension” provided cash assistance for mothers to stay home and take on a caretaking role for the family. Black women were frequently denied participation in the program as it was argued their exclusion from the workforce made it “exceedingly difficult for white families who need cooks and laundresses to get them.” In sum, white women were allowed to collect government benefits without any expectation to work while Black women were required to work for exploitative employers who paid poverty wages.^{3,4,5}

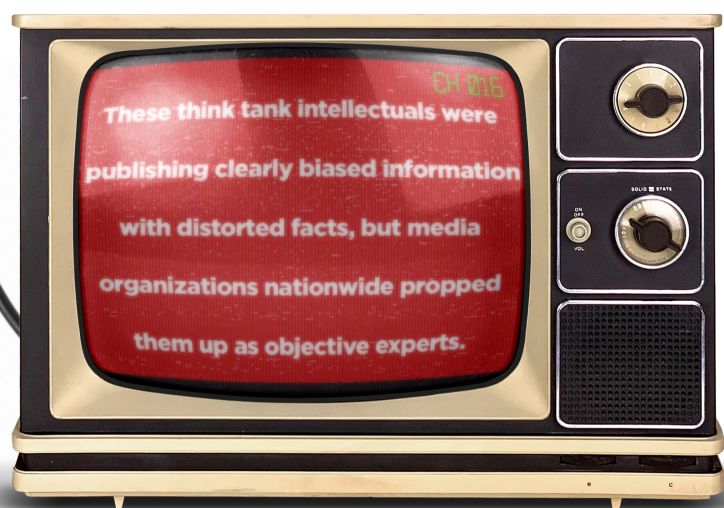
During the Great Depression, as the unemployment rate rose to 25%, the federal government created the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, alongside other New Deal initiatives, to help struggling families during harsh economic times. AFDC was popular for decades, a period during which the program was exclusionary and, with few exceptions, only available for white Americans.⁶



Through the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Americans started gaining access to safety net programs in the early- to mid-1960s. It is no coincidence that this is when the popularity of AFDC started to decline. Reactionaries, angry about the advances of the Civil Rights Movement, began painting recipients as “lazy” and “immoral” African Americans, even though the majority of AFDC recipients were white. **The media ran with and popularized these narratives, and, by 1967, Congress implemented the first ever work requirements for AFDC recipients.**⁷

During the 1970s, wealthy corporations saw an opportunity in harnessing the racial resentment that had been bubbling over the past decade. **They knew if workers did not have a social safety net on which to rely, they would have no choice but to accept whatever job they could find, regardless of wages or work conditions.**⁸ Within a year of its founding in 1973, the Heritage Foundation received grants from 87 corporations.⁹ Between 1974 and 1978, the number of corporate-sponsored political action committees (PACs) grew from 89 to 784 nationally.⁸

They published journals, books, and research papers, and sent direct mailers to households throughout the country. Much of what they published was exaggerated or even fabricated. One prominent example of misinformation suggested that the rate of teenage pregnancies among Black welfare recipients had tripled between 1960 and 1990.⁷ While this was wholly untrue, the individual who authored this account was invited on numerous TV programs, and the misinformation spread widely.



One analysis found the Heritage Foundation and two similar think tanks have been quoted more than 11,000 times in mainstream news media articles since the late 1970s.⁹ Consistent in their messaging

was the idea that AFDC recipients were Black Americans who were either street criminals, if they were men, or “welfare queens,” if they were women.

Their efforts to permeate this racist imagery into every corner of American society was a success. **By 1990, even though most AFDC recipients were still white, a survey found that 78% of white Americans believed African Americans “preferred to live off welfare.”**¹⁰ It is no surprise, then, that Congress passed legislation in 1996 gutting the AFDC and replacing it with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA), which decreased the amount of money available to families and erected barriers to receiving it. Feeding on racist stereotypes about “lazy” African Americans, the new legislation emphasized the importance of work in exchange for receiving benefits.

The normalization and proliferation of work requirements was a victory for proponents. Their decades-long propaganda campaign created a populace willing to do their bidding, demonizing those who can’t work as lazy and undeserving. And it allowed them to create a permanent pool of exploitable workers. This is evidenced by the fact that most people who are subject to work requirements continue to experience poverty and are driven deeper into poverty while they work jobs with no benefits and unpredictable hours.^{11,12}

The success in mainstreaming these beliefs means it may be unfair to paint today’s proponents of work requirements in the same light as early architects. **In the 1970s, corporations poured money into think tanks to sell this idea to the public; today, the public simply believes what has been sold to them.**

The federal government seems to understand the harm of work requirements, as a 2021 analysis from the Office of Management and Budget, which showed these policies “have substantial negative effects for individuals already facing scarcity,” has been recently scrubbed from federal databases.¹³

Work Requirements Don’t Lead to Self-Sufficiency

The argument typically put forth today is that government programs disincentivize work. With the average monthly SNAP benefit being less than \$200 per person, the logic that someone is choosing to forego a paycheck because they’re living comfortably off government subsidies falls extremely flat. Instead, most people who can work are already working, and those who cannot are not suddenly able to do so regardless of any requirement.¹¹

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation provides extreme clarity on the extensive negative impacts of work requirements in their statement from April 2025.¹⁴

“Decades of research show that work requirements do not move people off assistance and into self-sufficiency; instead they increase costs to states and taxpayers, harm health, keep eligible people from obtaining needed assistance, terminate health insurance coverage and other benefits, and drive people and families—already struggling to make ends meet—deeper into poverty.”

Physical and mental health conditions are one major factor that drives people to need assistance.¹⁵ A disability designation will usually allow an individual to be exempt from work requirements, but the average disability applicant waits more than a year for a final decision on their claim.¹⁶ Most people are denied benefits on their first attempt and may wait several years while going through the appeals process.¹⁷ This is a population that is unlikely to be able to sustain a consistent, stable work schedule and, due to work requirements, would be forced to forfeit crucial benefits while awaiting a disability designation.

Furthermore, family members who are tasked with caring for loved ones with chronic illnesses are not categorized as workers. Their dedication to holding their family together often means they do not have the time or capacity to maintain stable employment, and their uncompensated care work does not fulfill the requirement to work despite 48 million Americans performing a vital caregiver role.¹⁸

The inevitable result of these distorted policies is that the people who are in the most desperate need of assistance – caregivers and people struggling with disabilities – face the largest barriers to complying with work requirements. Most people whose situations don’t allow for stable employment do not find a job despite the requirement to do so and end up losing their benefits, driving them even further into poverty.¹⁹

The evidence could not be clearer: work requirements do not get people into long-term, well-paying, or rewarding jobs. Instead, they make people who are already working jump through hoops to prove they’re working, take benefits away from part-time workers and those who can’t work, and force people to accept the most undesirable work at the lowest wages.

Conclusion

It was clear within a few years of its passage in 1996 that welfare reform had failed to meet its stated goal

Studies show work reporting requirements actively harm the people they’re purported to support.

Among eight studies that were completed between 2001 and 2023, all had similar findings. And we found no studies during that same time that concluded work requirements were helpful in gainfully employing people or improving their financial outcomes.^{20, 21}

Studies found:

- Work requirements did not improve economic self-sufficiency, but did substantially reduce benefits paid to program recipients.²²
- Overall program participation among adults who were subject to work requirements was reduced by 53%, with people experiencing homelessness being disproportionately impacted. No improvements in employment were found.²³
- Work requirements substantially reduced SNAP participation but did not improve employment or earnings.²⁴
- Work requirements in Arkansas were associated with a significant loss of Medicaid coverage and a rise in the percentage of uninsured persons. There were no significant changes in employment associated with the policy, and more than 95% of those targeted by the policy already met the requirement or should have been exempt.²⁵

of getting folks on a path toward self-sufficiency.

By 2001, many former welfare recipients had entered the workforce, but most were earning poverty wages.²⁶ For poor working families, poverty only deepened, especially for single mothers. Since then, the number of people receiving cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (which replaced AFDC) has continued to decline rapidly. **In 1979, for every 100 families with children in poverty, 82 of those families received AFDC benefits. By 2021, only 21 of every 100 families with children in poverty received TANF benefits.**²⁷

It’s no surprise that punitive work requirements have not led to better outcomes for families. History shows that improved outcomes are not a function of work requirements. Instead, they have been used as a blunt force tool to harm targeted populations

through means like violence and starvation. Past targets included African Americans and Native Americans. Current targets are people struggling with disabilities and those taking care of them.

The results today will mirror the results from past iterations. Some of those who lose Medicaid – a population who already have relatively higher medical needs – will die due to their inability to access medical care.²⁸ Those who lose food assistance will struggle with hunger and experience additional health issues resulting from poor nutrition and malnutrition, which will in turn go untreated because their ability to access medical care will be stripped away.

It is crucial that the American populace understand the history of work requirements if we want to begin divesting from this brutal policy. It is a well-honed tactic historically used by the powerful to coerce the powerless to participate in labor that is not fairly compensated under the threat of losing their life or livelihood. The work requirements just passed by Congress are no different.

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