

Welfare

Sociology



The Welfare explosion in the 1960s: Public policy vs Social theory

The decade of the 1960s in the United States was characterized by economic climate of relative prosperity and stability with a number of social welfare programs in place to address the needs of the poor. Persistent poverty continued to be a prevalent concern, however, especially among blacks and minorities. These conditions prompted the federal government to launch the War on Poverty which included an elevation in the definition of poverty as well as increased welfare payments. Welfare in the United States can be described as the provision of federal, state and local government programs and services to help alleviate the adverse social and economic conditions and needs of the poor. This help is provided in cash as well as in-kind services through a number and variety of programs such as Medicaid, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program. The development of the liberal social welfare structure in the United States has been through the "pragmatic and incremental" combination of old fashioned tradition and adaptation to meet the needs created through changing social and economic conditions. In the earliest colonial times the social safety net consisted primarily of families, local communities and charitable giving often carried out through religious establishments. Between the start of the twentieth century and 1940 government expenditures on relief for the poor increased by a factor of ten. Between 1960 and 1970 the number of families receiving welfare assistance increased by 222% with the largest increase occurring after 1964. The "War on Poverty", which officially began in 1964, represented a new and ambitious approach by the federal, state and local governments together with non-profit organizations and anti-poverty groups in an institutionalized approach

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to dealing with the problem of persistent poverty, along with increasing levels of ideological and racial tension in the United States. An unprecedented amount of new legislation included the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Job Corps, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), Upward Bound, Head Start, Legal Services, the Neighborhood Youth Corps as well as small business loan programs, rural programs, local health centers and migrant worker programs. However, the launching of this new proliferation of liberal and more compassionate government programs during a time of relative economic prosperity - with unemployment at around 3.5% - also served to help highlight the growing ideological and racial tensions in the United States. Rioting in the black slums became prominent and there was no noticeable improvement in the living conditions among poor people compared to when they were not on welfare. A 1965 report on the condition of the black family by then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel P. Moynihan suggested that relief programs were contributing to increased demoralization and disorganization found among black families, with an increasing number of female-headed households even more dependent on welfare. In the midst of this welfare explosion between 1964 and 1968, Moynihan found that even though unemployment was at its lowest peacetime level of 3.5%, (a) most of the new welfare recipients were in the Aid to Dependent Children category, (b) a growing proportion of these types of families were black and without a father, and (c) the disorganization among black families was occurring in spite of improving economic conditions. Moynihan, however, could not provide a plausible explanation for his observations. Social theorists and other commentators have provided varied interpretations and explanations of these apparently inconsistent

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outcomes of the anti-poverty efforts in an attempt to explain this growth in dependency. One of the primary social welfare theories in this debate centered on that provided by Professors Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. According to Piven and Cloward's general theory relief arrangements in capitalist societies relief programs such as the programs implemented in the War on Poverty initiative, are created and sustained in order to alleviate social instability caused by natural disruptions in market economies. Neoconservatives, however, exploited and extended this theory to support their argument for the failure of the variety of liberal policies and programs beginning in the 1930s and in place at the time as the reason for the welfare explosion of the sixties. One such neoconservative argument states that the increased disorganization and demoralization noted by Moynihan among black families, as well as the rise in female-headed households, resulted from the fact that the economic role of the black male had been diminished and even made inconsequential due to the high level of welfare payments compared to what can be earned from work. Increasingly, males found themselves gravitating for companionship and social relations and acceptance at the street corners along with other displaced black males. It appeared as if, in spite of the increase in new programs - including increases in welfare payments - to help alleviate economic conditions among the poor, that those very initiatives were creating, unwittingly or unknowingly, a new set of social problems in an already tense environment. Furthermore, neoconservatives argued that the explosion in the number and variety of new programs helped to add another layer of factors that contributed to the increasing reliance on welfare and other types of government transfer payments to the poor. They contended that changes

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in the official definitions of "poverty" and "need" as part of the War on Poverty resulted in significant increases in the number of those who were now eligible for welfare among the poor and that the increased value of welfare payments made them more attractive compared to income from work. Conservatives used this argument as justification for the findings of increased levels of disorganization in black households noted by Moynihan in his 1965 report. It was as if a new vicious cycle was created wherein increased welfare payments helped to marginalize the economic role of the male head of household leading to a dramatic increase in the number of female-headed households who increasingly relied on welfare payments. In addition, according to this neoconservative view, there was an organized campaign by liberal public officials and public employees, social workers, community organizations, the Welfare Rights Movement and other liberal proponents of the War on Poverty to drum up support and actively push the programs and the new bureaucratic structures created through the host of new legislation. This campaign to sign up new program participants from among the poor included a push to reduce or remove any reluctance due to pride, ignorance or fear among those who were eligible but not yet obtaining welfare benefits to do so, thereby contributing to increased levels of participation in welfare benefits. In the absence of any definitive explanation of the causes of the welfare explosion of the 1960s the subject became fodder for emotional debate and political demagoguery between the left and the right. The well-intentioned policies and programs of liberal administrations seemed to create a new vicious circle of poverty and welfare dependence among the poor while the right denounced the explosion of new government welfare programs for failing to acknowledge what they

considered to be the true causes - the government's redefinition of "poverty" and "needy", the resulting increase in the number of eligible poor, and the concerted push by social activists to increase welfare participation rates among the eligible population. REFERENCES O'Connor, J. (1973). The Fiscal Crisis of the State. St Martin's Press. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A Cloward, Regulating the Poor, Vintage Carpignano, P. (1974, January). U. s. class composition in the sixties Capital's "New: Dimensions": The Kennedy Initiative. Retrieved from <http://libcom.org/library/us-class-composition-sixties-paolo-carpignano-zero-work> Chantrill, C. US Government Spending, (2012). Us welfare spending history from 1900. Retrieved from website: http://www.usgovernmentdebt.us/welfare_spending Civil Disorder and the Welfare Explosion: A Two-Step Process Sanford F. Schram and J. Patrick Turbett American Sociological Review Vol. 48, No. 3 (Jun., 1983), pp. 408-414 (article consists of 7 pages) Published by: American Sociological Association Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2095232> Kristol, I. (1971, August). The best of intentions, the worst of results. Retrieved from: <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/flashbks/welfare/kristolf.htm> Magnet, M. (2005, December 19). Ending welfare as we know it. Retrieved from: http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/_national_review-ending_welfare.htm Rector, R. (1995, December 4). Why congress must reform welfare. Retrieved from <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/1995/12/bg1063-why-congress-must>