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**WELFARE QUEENS AND WORK REQUIREMENTS: THE POWER OF NARRATIVE AND COUNTER-NARRATIVE**  
*Nick Burns*

“There’s a woman in Chicago,” said the former movie star and Governor of California turned Republican candidate for President of the United States.<sup>1</sup> The crowd hung on the candidate’s every word. His gift for storytelling would later earn him the nickname, “The Great Communicator.”<sup>2</sup> He was known for his ability to communicate stories with eloquence, humor, and ease with varying audiences.<sup>3</sup> In this particular instance, in which he told a crowd about “a woman in Chicago,” Ronald Reagan found himself campaigning in New Hampshire during the 1976 Republican Presidential Primary.<sup>4</sup>

During this primary cycle, Reagan established himself as an outsider candidate, a favorite for Republicans who viewed then-President Gerald Ford as too moderate.<sup>5</sup> Early in the race, Reagan toured New Hampshire, making attacks on welfare a routine part of his stump speeches.<sup>6</sup> This narrative, one he utilized as Governor of California and later as President of the United States, was no stranger to Reagan.<sup>7</sup>

“She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards[,] and is collecting veterans’ benefits on four nonexistent deceased husbands.”<sup>8</sup> The insurgent candidate’s story is finding a home in the hearts of New Hampshire Republicans.<sup>9</sup> By 1976, due to racialized media coverage on poverty and welfare, Reagan’s story did not have to explicitly state that “the woman in Chicago” was a Black woman for the crowd to understand that she was a Black woman.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Welfare Queen’ Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign, N. Y. TIMES (Feb. 15, 1976), <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/02/15/archives/welfare-queen-becomes-issue-in-reagan-campaign-hitting-a-nerve-now.html> [hereinafter Welfare Queen in Reagan Campaign] (featuring excerpts from then-candidate Ronald Reagan’s campaign stops in New Hampshire as a part of the 1976 Republican Presidential Primary).

<sup>2</sup> Lee Edwards, *What Made Reagan a Truly Great Communicator*, THE HERITAGE FOUND. (Feb. 5, 2018), <https://www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/what-made-reagan-truly-great-communicator> [hereinafter What Made Reagan a Truly Great Communicator].

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* (“Reagan was . . . a superb orator—one of the most inspiring in American politics, at ease with a formal address to Congress or to the British Parliament, a “fireside chat” with the American people from the Oval Office or a blunt challenge to a foreign adversary.”).

<sup>4</sup> Welfare Queen in Reagan Campaign, *supra* note 1.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Glass, *Ronald Reagan Enters Presidential Race: Nov. 20, 1975*, POLITICO (Nov. 19, 2016), <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/ronald-reagan-enters-presidential-race-nov-20-1975-231633> (noting that groups like the American Conservative Union backed Reagan during his 1976 presidential bid).

<sup>6</sup> See Welfare Queen in Reagan Campaign, *supra* note 1 (reporting that Reagan’s attacks on “welfare chislers . . . hit a nerve” with audiences at his New Hampshire campaign stops).

<sup>7</sup> David E. Keefe, *Governor Reagan, Welfare Reform, and AFDC Fertility*, 57 SOC. SERV. REV. 234, 234 (1983) (explaining that, while Governor of California, to convince the Democrat-controlled state legislature to adopt welfare reform, Reagan “first . . . declare[d] a welfare crisis”).

<sup>8</sup> Welfare Queen in Reagan Campaign, *supra* note 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Black & Aleta Sprague, *The Rise and Reign of the Welfare Queen*, NEW AM. (Sept. 22, 2016), <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/rise-and-reign-welfare-queen/> (explaining that by 1967, 72% of photos accompanying media stories about poverty featured Black Americans).

“[S]he’s collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free income alone is over \$150,000.”<sup>11</sup> The crowd laughs at the ludicrous nature of the story.<sup>12</sup> Ronald Reagan, “The Great Communicator,”<sup>13</sup> yet again dazzled a crowd with an entertaining, and seemingly truthful, story. This anecdote became a permanent fixture in Reagan’s speeches, a story broadcasted across the country, establishing a narrative about those receiving welfare assistance.<sup>14</sup>

The only issue, however, is that the story is not true.<sup>15</sup> Linda Taylor is the story’s subject.<sup>16</sup> The government charged Ms. Taylor with fraud, but she used four aliases, not eighty.<sup>17</sup> She defrauded \$3,000 from the State of Illinois, not \$150,000.<sup>18</sup> The flimsy nature of Reagan’s story, like many told about those in poverty, went unchecked by the media, other politicians, and the public majority. A narrative had been established with almost non-existent resistance.

Reagan’s attacks on welfare did not stop with Ms. Taylor though.<sup>19</sup> Throughout his 1976 campaign, he frequently told audiences about Taino Towers, a four-building subsidized housing project in New York City.<sup>20</sup> “If you are a slum dweller,<sup>21</sup> you can get an apartment with 11-foot ceilings, with a 20-foot balcony, a swimming pool and gymnasium, laundry room[,] and play room, and the rent begins at \$113.20 and that includes utilities.”<sup>22</sup> The facts here, like Reagan’s story of the “woman in Chicago,” are entirely misleading. In Taino Towers, only ninety-two of 656 units had eleven-foot ceilings.<sup>23</sup> Within those units, the high ceiling was only over the kitchen and the living room.<sup>24</sup> Those units did not rent at \$113.20 per month.<sup>25</sup> Finally, while the amenities did exist, they were also shared with a community of 200,000 people.<sup>26</sup>

Two unfortunate truths can be drawn from these anecdotes. First, they do not need to be factually accurate for Reagan’s point to be made: people are scamming the welfare system,

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<sup>11</sup> Welfare Queen in Reagan Campaign, *supra* note 1.

<sup>12</sup> Hari Sreenivasan et al., *The True Story Behind the ‘Welfare Queen’ Stereotype*, PBS (June 1, 2019), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-true-story-behind-the-welfare-queen-stereotype> (featuring an audio recording of Ronald Reagan recounting his story of the “woman in Chicago”).

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, *supra* note 2.

<sup>14</sup> Welfare Queen in Reagan Campaign, *supra* note 1.

<sup>15</sup> See generally Gene Demby, *The Truth Behind the Lies of the Original ‘Welfare Queen’*, NPR (Dec. 20, 2013), <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/20/255819681/the-truth-behind-the-lies-of-the-original-welfare-queen>.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* (“Linda Taylor was never mentioned by name, but she was the subject of many of Ronald Reagan’s 1976 presidential campaign speech anecdotes about a Chicago woman who’d defrauded the government of hundreds of thousands of dollars.”).

<sup>17</sup> Welfare Queen in Reagan Campaign, *supra* note 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* Even the word choice of “slum dweller,” as opposed to “person” or “resident,” begins to chip away at the humanity of those living in subsidized housing.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* (featuring an account from Robert Nichol, the project coordinator for the development).

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* (quoting Robert Nichol, the project coordinator for Taino Towers, as saying there is “no way . . . anyone could get such an apartment for \$113.20. The going rent would either be \$450 a month or one-fourth of a family’s income.”).

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

cheating the American taxpayer, and those people are Black women. Second, the public does not respect the dignity of the poor, especially poor Black women, enough to stamp out false narratives before they gain traction and find a place in the public's psyche.

In this paper, I will trace the welfare queen narrative to modern times and connect the narrative to welfare policy decisions. In Part I, I share my own experience providing legal services to those receiving welfare assistance and explain the power of story. Part II traces the increased racialization of welfare. Part III, then, demonstrates how President Reagan's rhetoric led to tangible policy decisions regarding welfare while he was President of the United States. After establishing this connection, Part IV delves into how the Trump Administration, by tightening work requirements for SNAP, is picking up where the Reagan Administration left off. Part V dissects a seeming trend by examining two states, Arkansas and South Carolina, that have implemented harsher work requirements for Medicaid. Part VI, finally, offers two recommendations. First, the federal government and state governments should cease implementing work requirements for welfare as they are ineffective. Second, establishing a counter-narrative, by amplifying the voices of those receiving welfare assistance, is essential to combatting the welfare queen myth.

## PART I

### *A. Commonalities Amongst Medicaid Recipients in Tennessee*

During the summer between my second and third years of law school, I worked for a non-profit organization in Nashville, Tennessee helping low-income individuals preserve their government-assisted health benefits. Given that my clients were scattered across Tennessee, most of my client interactions took place over the phone. After an individual contacted the organization, and an intake employee obtained their basic information, I was assigned to handle the case. Once I reviewed their intake file, I would place a call into the client.

In a state that has continually refused to expand Medicaid,<sup>27</sup> I was always sure to maintain an awareness that my client was likely in a high-stress situation. In a massive government bureaucracy like a state's health care program, one person represents a ripple in a massive sea. Yet for that person, these situations are dire. A denial of their Medicaid benefits can result in them, or a loved one, not being able to receive life-saving, or life-sustaining, treatment. Put bluntly, public benefits advocacy saves lives.

After our introductions, I would encourage the client to share the details of their case. The stories always differed. One woman called on behalf of her brother who was too sick to remedy the issues in his Medicaid application and subsequent denial. A mother sought help because her special-needs son's health coverage had been terminated. Another mother called because her daughter desperately needed dental surgery, as her mouth featured numerous lacerations, a procedure the state deemed to be "not necessary."

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<sup>27</sup> Brett Kelman, *Medicaid Expansion: 3 Deep-Red States Just Did It. Why Not Tennessee?*, TENNESSEAN (Nov. 19, 2018), <https://www.tennessean.com/story/money/2018/11/20/medicaid-expansion-tennessee-bill-lee/1926701002/> (questioning why Tennessee, one "of the unhealthiest states in the country," has not expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act).

These conversations, which played out over several weeks or months, nearly always featured two commonalities, however. First, the client would assure me that they were not cheating the government simply because they were receiving assistance. They would tell me that their family had fallen on hard times. They would vent about the struggles of caring for children and a disabled spouse all while trying to maintain employment. They would delve into the details of their health issues, communicating that they were too sick to work. They would go to great lengths to assure me they were justified in receiving help. Even after these clarifications, I could sense a consistent battle with shame in my clients. One must ask why feelings of shame are so intertwined with welfare.

The inverse of this is the second commonality in nearly all of my conversations. While assuring me they were not welfare cheats, my clients would nearly always contrast themselves with supposed welfare scammers. “I’m not like those people who don’t work and just live off the government,” they said. “I’m not faking a disability so I can scam the government,” they assured me. “It’s the people cheating the system that are preventing me from receiving the help I need,” they claimed. There were people who deserved help, and there were people who did not deserve help.

### ***B. The In-Groups and Out-Groups in America’s Welfare Discourse***

Narratives create a sense of cultural cohesion, the basis upon which public policy decisions are made.<sup>28</sup> Cultural narratives also form the basis for in-group and out-group distinctions.<sup>29</sup> This divide is evident in cultural narratives in the United States on welfare.<sup>30</sup> The in-group comprises those who “deserve” welfare benefits.<sup>31</sup> They work hard, they are honest, and they only receive temporary assistance.<sup>32</sup> The out-group, conversely, is a collection of those who do not “deserve” welfare benefits.<sup>33</sup> They are lazy, they are dishonest, and they are responsible for multi-generational dependence on welfare.<sup>34</sup>

Not only is this narrative damaging on its face, but it is also steeped in racial implications.<sup>35</sup> In talks of the in-group, the deserving welfare recipients, images of white working-class citizens in rural communities come to mind. They know how to contribute a good, honest day of hard work. If they have substance abuse issues, then it is viewed through the lens of a health problem, as it should be.<sup>36</sup> In talks of the out-group, the undeserving recipients, images of single Black mothers

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<sup>28</sup> See Richard Delgado, *Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 2411, 2412 (1989) (“stories create their own bonds and represent cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings”).

<sup>29</sup> See *id.* (“The stories or narratives told by the in-group remind it of its identity in relation to out-groups and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural.”).

<sup>30</sup> See Peter Edelman, *Welfare and the Politics of Race: Same Tune, New Lyrics?*, 11 GEO. J. ON POVERTY L. & POL’Y 389, 390 (2004).

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> See generally *id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> See generally *id.*

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 389.

<sup>36</sup> See generally Dr. Julie Netherland & Dr. Helena B. Hansen, *The War on Drugs That Wasn’t: Wasted Whiteness, “Dirty Doctors,” and Race in Media Coverage of Prescription Opioid Misuse*, 40 CULTURE, MED., AND PSYCHIATRY

living in inner-cities flood the mind. Not only do they not work, but they are actively scheming to avoid employment while still receiving government assistance. If they have substance abuse problems, then it is the result of a lack of personal responsibility.<sup>37</sup> Once this narrative has been established, the policy implications flow naturally.<sup>38</sup> The out-group does not deserve assistance, so restricting aid is a logical conclusion.<sup>39</sup>

The power of story, and the presence of already-established narratives, is why amplifying voices of the marginalized is essential to social progress.<sup>40</sup> The voices in these stories are not the President or a member of Congress. They are not people who typically guide public discourse. Instead, they are people who keep society's nuts and bolts intact. They are store clerks, grocers, cooks, service industry employees, and delivery drivers. Even more important to acknowledge, they are also the unemployed, including those experiencing homelessness. The narratives told about these individuals, often from the mouths of the powerful, can serve as a tool of oppression as they justify policy decisions directly harmful to this nation's low-income communities.<sup>41</sup> This is why it is essential to understand the roots of a narrative and trace it to today.

## PART II

### *A. Where Does the Welfare Queen Find Her Roots?*

While Reagan's 1976 campaign brought the term "welfare queen" into the national spotlight,<sup>42</sup> its seeds had been sown long before Reagan's speeches.<sup>43</sup> The public had been primed for years with narratives drawing a direct connection between the "undeserving poor" and the Black poor.<sup>44</sup> By the time Reagan made his way to New Hampshire in 1976, no explicit mention of Black women needed to be made for the crowds to understand that Reagan was referring to Black women.<sup>45</sup>

The 1935 Social Security Act excluded domestic work and agricultural labor—industries that relied heavily on Black people—from eligibility.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, states had nearly unfettered discretion in determining eligibility for the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program,

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664 (2016) (drawing a correlation between the racial aspects of media coverage on the opioid crisis and how that coverage led to different policy decisions from those of the crack crisis).

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *See infra* Parts III–IV.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> *See* Kathryn Abrams, *Hearing the Call of Stories*, 79 CAL. L. REV. 971, 975 (1991) (using critical feminist theory, which can include discussion of bodily experiences, to remind readers that such perspectives "are not frequently discussed in public, let alone the pages of law reviews. The voices heard in the narratives are not the judges and lawmakers who conventionally occupy our scholarly attention, but women: women who may also be minorities or members of other disadvantaged groups.").

<sup>41</sup> *See infra* Parts III–IV.

<sup>42</sup> *See* Kevin Sack, *The New, Volatile Politics of Welfare*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 15, 1992), <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/15/us/the-1992-campaign-issues-the-new-volatile-politics-of-welfare.html> (claiming that Ronald Reagan "transformed the "welfare queen" into a weapon of class warfare").

<sup>43</sup> *See generally* Black & Sprague, *supra* note 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *See* Welfare Queen in Reagan Campaign, *supra* note 1.

<sup>46</sup> *See* Black & Sprague, *supra* note 10 (adding that while the New Deal made great strides in establishing the framework for anti-poverty activism, racial tensions were present from the start).

an anti-poverty assistance resource created by the New Deal.<sup>47</sup> In practice, this discretion looked like southern states restricting access to benefits during harvesting seasons.<sup>48</sup> This forced poor, Black families to work in the fields at whatever wages were offered.<sup>49</sup> The racial nature of this practice is undeniable. By 1939, the ADC caseload was eighty percent white even though Black families comprised a disproportionate number of families living in poverty.<sup>50</sup>

Despite welfare's current entangled relationship with race, by the 1950s it had yet to evolve into its own unique tool in racial politics.<sup>51</sup> The explanation for this reality is rather blunt: politicians did not need to use "welfare" as a code word for race because, at the time, politicians could display their racism in open and explicit terms.<sup>52</sup> Welfare rolls, which were predominantly white at the time, manifested this explicit racism.<sup>53</sup> This, combined with the fact that the number of families on welfare was relatively small, meant there was no reason for politicians to make an issue of race and welfare.<sup>54</sup>

Once the 1960s arrived, however, the conversation on welfare changed drastically.<sup>55</sup> Welfare rolls expanded, and people of color comprised a disproportionate share in that expansion.<sup>56</sup> The racist backlash was quick and explicit. Louisiana, for example, began disqualifying Black people from welfare programs in an effort to drive them out of the state.<sup>57</sup> The District of Columbia had a "man in the house" rule.<sup>58</sup> This provision banned welfare payments to mothers in the District of Columbia, which was comprised of almost exclusively of Black women, who lived with a man to whom they were not married.<sup>59</sup> Then, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, as Assistant Secretary of Labor, drew a direct connection between race and welfare in his 1965 report titled, "*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*."<sup>60</sup> In this report, Moynihan blamed Black family structures for keeping Black families in poverty.<sup>61</sup>

By 1968, the Supreme Court made several significant rulings regarding the Social Security Act of 1935.<sup>62</sup> For instance, the Court held that if a person meeting the federal statute's definition

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<sup>47</sup> See Black & Sprague, *supra* note 10 (noting that states' discretion in the realm of welfare led to explicit racial discrimination).

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> See Edelman, *supra* note 30 (noting that while the welfare system prior to the 1960s was "steeped in racism," it had yet to become a code word for race).

<sup>52</sup> See *id.* (explaining that there was no need for racial code words at the time because "[p]oliticians displayed their racism openly and across the board").

<sup>53</sup> See *id.* at 390 (citing to Robert C. Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State* 127 (1998)).

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> See *id.* (citing to Robert C. Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State* 155 (1998)).

<sup>57</sup> *Id.* (citing to Kenneth J. Neubeck & Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor* 71–73 (2001)).

<sup>58</sup> *Id.* at 390–91.

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 391.

<sup>61</sup> See *id.* (blaming Black family structures for the "tangle of pathology" that kept Black families in poverty).

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

of eligibility sought aid at a welfare office, then they had the right to cash assistance.<sup>63</sup> The Court also struck down the “man in the house” rule.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, a family’s benefits could not be revoked without a face-to-face hearing,<sup>65</sup> and states could not require new families to be residents for a certain period of time before becoming eligible for welfare benefits.<sup>66</sup> These decisions, to some, indicated that the Court might declare a constitutional right to a minimum income.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, this progress, similar to other societal progressions in United States history, spurned a backlash towards the Black community.<sup>68</sup>

This is when critiques of welfare and racism began to collide.<sup>69</sup> In 1964, twenty-seven percent of photos accompanying stories about poverty in three of the country’s top weekly news magazines featured Black subjects.<sup>70</sup> In the following year, that number rose to forty-nine percent.<sup>71</sup> By 1967, it was seventy-two percent.<sup>72</sup> With the increased racialization of poverty, the narrative became clear: Black families are choosing to not work and are living off of the government.<sup>73</sup>

Similar to Reagan’s story of “the woman in Chicago,” the frequency of Black subjects in stories about poverty was far from the reality of the situation.<sup>74</sup> Black families have never constituted a majority of those on welfare.<sup>75</sup> Even more specifically, the media focused on inner-city Black families although these families have never comprised more than twenty percent of all people on welfare.<sup>76</sup> The facts were never consulted, however, and the racialization of poverty became undeniably clear.<sup>77</sup>

This is not to suggest that there were no issues in inner-cities. Violent crime saw a steady uptick from the 1960s to the 1980s.<sup>78</sup> Students were also dropping out of school at increasing

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<sup>63</sup> Edelman, *supra* note 30.

<sup>64</sup> See *King v. Smith*, 392 U.S. 311, 325–27 (1968) (holding that Alabama’s approach in the case “plainly conflict[ed] with the Act”).

<sup>65</sup> See *Goldberg v. Kelly*, 397 U.S. 254, 264 (1970) (holding that “only a pre-termination evidentiary hearing provides the recipient with procedural due process”).

<sup>66</sup> See *Shapiro v. Thompson*, 394 U.S. 618, 632 (1969) (“But we do not perceive why a mother who is seeking to make a new life for herself and her children should be regarded as less deserving because she considers, among other factors, the level of a State’s public assistance. Surely such a mother is no less deserving than a mother who moves into a particular State in order to take advantage of its better educational facilities.”).

<sup>67</sup> Edelman, *supra* note 30, at 392.

<sup>68</sup> See *id.* (adding that the view of welfare as a right, as opposed to a privilege, “drove some people up the wall”).

<sup>69</sup> Black & Sprague, *supra* note 10.

<sup>70</sup> *Id.*

<sup>71</sup> *Id.*

<sup>72</sup> *Id.*

<sup>73</sup> *Id.*

<sup>74</sup> Edelman, *supra* note 30, at 392 (describing the differences between perception and reality with respect to African Americans and welfare).

<sup>75</sup> *Id.* (explaining that from 1969–2001, 35–46% of AFDC/TANF recipients were African American).

<sup>76</sup> *Id.*

<sup>77</sup> See *id.* at 392–93 (summarizing the racialization of welfare by stating, “the...stereotype of the typical welfare recipient—the image that millions of Americans carried in their minds—was that of a never-married inner-city African-American woman who kept getting pregnant in order to get a bigger welfare check”).

<sup>78</sup> Lauren Brook Eisen, *America’s Faulty Perception of Crime Rates*, BRENNAN CTR. (Mar. 16, 2015), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/americas-faulty-perception-crime-rates> (noting that violent crimes increase by 126% from 1960 to 1970 and 64% from 1970 to 1980).



rates.<sup>79</sup> Many then portrayed welfare as the cause of the problems in inner-cities.<sup>80</sup> Subsequently, this narrative took hold in the public's conscious and prevented the public from having necessary conversations on race.<sup>81</sup> Instead of addressing housing discrimination or redlining, politicians critiqued welfare.<sup>82</sup> Rather than shed light on systemic racism in the United States, Black women became the scapegoat.<sup>83</sup>

### ***B. The American Dream, Hard Work, and Personal Responsibility***

The “American Dream” posits that so long as one dedicates themselves to hard work, then they can succeed.<sup>84</sup> This, combined with “traditional” family values, serves as the cornerstone of United States ethics.<sup>85</sup> Because of the crucial role this narrative plays in our self-identity, those who work are viewed as morally superior while those who do not work find themselves in the bottom rungs of societal, and subsequently moral, value.<sup>86</sup> The implicit association with those receiving welfare assistance, then, is that if not for their lack of work ethic, they would not need assistance.<sup>87</sup> When this critique becomes a damning verdict on a person's value, it can be easy to depict that person as sub-human.

Politicians, for example, are not exempt from comparing welfare recipients to animals.<sup>88</sup> Representative John Mica once compared welfare recipients to alligators and explicitly called on Congress to not “[f]eed the alligators.”<sup>89</sup> Barbara Cubin, on the other hand, compared welfare recipients to wolves.<sup>90</sup> While no one should be referred to in such terms, this rhetoric serves as the basis for the dehumanizing nature of the welfare queen narrative. When a person is referred to as an animal, society is not required to analyze the nuances and complexities in that person's life.

In the earlier-mentioned report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Moynihan made aggressive critiques against the Black family.<sup>91</sup> His report

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<sup>79</sup> *High School Dropout Rates*, CHILD TRENDS (2018), <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/high-school-dropout-rates> (outlining that in 1972, the dropout rate was 21% amongst non-Hispanic Black youth, 12% among non-Hispanic white youth, and 34% among Hispanic youth).

<sup>80</sup> Kay C. James, *Baltimore's Undeniable Truths—I Grew Up on Welfare. Here's What I Know*, THE HERITAGE FOUND. (Aug. 5, 2019), <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/commentary/baltimores-undeniable-truths-i-grew-welfare-heres-what-i-know> (using Baltimore's struggles to argue for welfare reform).

<sup>81</sup> See Edelman, *supra* note 30, at 393–95 (discussing the trajectory of public perception and government action through the 1960s and 1970s).

<sup>82</sup> *Id.* at 393.

<sup>83</sup> *Id.*

<sup>84</sup> See *Dethroning the Welfare Queen*, 107 HARV. L. REV. 2013, 2015 (1994).

<sup>85</sup> See *id.* (“[t]ogether, the work ethic and family values constitute the American cultural ethic.”).

<sup>86</sup> See *id.* (noting that “societal value directly increases in proportion to work-related success”).

<sup>87</sup> *Id.*

<sup>88</sup> Nikita McMillian, *From Loving Mother to Welfare Queen to Drug Addict? Lebron v. Secretary of Florida Department of Children and Families and the Evolving Public View of the Poor as a Class of Sub-Humans with Sub-Rights*, 35 MISS. C.L. REV. 197, 197 (2016).

<sup>89</sup> *Id.*

<sup>90</sup> See *id.* (featuring a 1995 quote from Wyoming Representative Barbara Cubin in which she stated, “[w]hat has happened with the wolves, just like what happens with human beings, when you take away their incentives...they have to be provided for”).

<sup>91</sup> *Id.* at 210 (referencing DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN, U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, *THE NEGRO FAMILY; THE CASE FOR NATIONAL ACTION* (1965)).

started by claiming that “[a]s a direct result of [the] high rate of divorce, separation, and desertion, a very large percent of Negro families are headed by females.”<sup>92</sup> Moynihan then drew the connection between the disintegration of the Black family and the growing rate of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) recipients.<sup>93</sup> His findings furthered the theory that single Black mothers were the source of the problems in inner-cities.<sup>94</sup>

This strikes directly at the core of emphasis on hard work and “traditional” family values.<sup>95</sup> These “traditional” family values hold that houses are to include a husband and a wife.<sup>96</sup> As images of single Black mothers proliferated the media and political landscape, fundamental United States values were threatened in two main ways.<sup>97</sup> First, it reinforced the idea that inner-city Black women are willfully bucking societal standards by not getting married.<sup>98</sup> When a society places a high priority on the traditional family unit, thus implicating marriage, those who do not abide by such a lifestyle can be viewed as lacking in personal responsibility.<sup>99</sup> Second, it served as fodder for the myth that Black women are scheming for ways to defraud the government for more benefits.<sup>100</sup> By not getting married, theoretically, these women have access to more benefits than if they were married.<sup>101</sup> What this conversation entirely ignores, however, is a racially biased criminal justice system’s role in removing Black men from their families.<sup>102</sup>

Moynihan’s report, in conjunction with Reagan’s rhetoric and the media’s biased coverage, caused concerns of welfare fraud and cheating to grow throughout the 1970s.<sup>103</sup> This idea, that a sect of society was willfully choosing to not work and instead cheat taxpayers, struck at the core of United States ethics.<sup>104</sup> In a country that directly correlates one’s value with one’s work ethic,

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<sup>92</sup> McMillian, *supra* note 88, at 210.

<sup>93</sup> *Id.*

<sup>94</sup> *See id.* (asserting that Moynihan’s report “fueled the perception of the single Black mother as the source of . . . ills of the inner cities”).

<sup>95</sup> *See Dethroning the Welfare Queen*, *supra* note 84, at 2015.

<sup>96</sup> *Id.*

<sup>97</sup> *See id.*, at 211.

<sup>98</sup> *Id.* at 210.

<sup>99</sup> *See* Xandi McMahon, *The Non-Consensual Identity Politics of the “Welfare Queen,”* COMPASS: THE GALLATIN RES. J. (last viewed Apr. 27, 2020), <https://wp.nyu.edu/compass/2018/11/13/the-non-consensual-identity-politics-of-the-welfare-queen/> (featuring a 1994 series ran by the *Journal Star* in Peoria, Illinois titled, “Unwed Parents”, a series that entailed numerous invasive photos of teenage girls giving birth, furthering a narrative of a lack of personal responsibility).

<sup>100</sup> *Id.*

<sup>101</sup> *See* Julien O. Teitler, Nancy E. Reichman, Lenna Nepomnyaschy, & Irwin Garfinkel, *Effects of Welfare Participation on Marriage*, 71(4) JOURNAL OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY 878, 879 (2009).

<sup>102</sup> *See* Camille Gear Rich, *Who’s Afraid of the Welfare Queen? Stigmatized Motherhood, Tropes and the Policing of the American Poor*, 2015 JOTWELL: J. THINGS WE LIKE 168, 169 (2015).

<sup>103</sup> *See* McMillian, *supra* note 88, at 211 (connecting this fear to “welfare queen” images of corruption running rampant among low-income Black women).

<sup>104</sup> *See* Rich, *supra* note 102, at 168 (“Instead of examining the structural conditions that produce poverty, we create villains like the welfare queen—a woman who irresponsibly bears children and has little interest in anything besides public consumption. Villainized figures like the welfare queen become easy targets in a neo-liberal state that emphasizes personal responsibility.”).

those who are believed to lack personal responsibility are undeserving of assistance.<sup>105</sup> Because of this rhetoric, Black women, in a twisted way, became villains in a system already designed to limit their economic and political capital.<sup>106</sup>

### PART III

#### *A. From the Campaign Trail to the Oval Office: President Reagan's Stories as a Basis for Policy Decisions*

Numerous legal scholars have drawn a direct correlation between narrative and judicial decisions.<sup>107</sup> In fact, the United States' commencing legal documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, are steeped in story and narrative.<sup>108</sup> While recognizing the connection between history and legal decisions is essential, including the potential for injustice and violence stemming from the written word,<sup>109</sup> that is not the focus of this paper. Instead, this paper narrows its focus to political and public narratives, which do find some similarities to judicial narratives.

For instance, in his article *Violence and the Word*, Robert Cover dissects the inherent cruelty in the written legal word.<sup>110</sup> The bizarre issue here, he writes, is that orders that take away one's freedom, or even their life, are written in a seemingly civil, peaceful context.<sup>111</sup> Though political rhetoric is often passionate and appeals to human emotion, the connection between these two forms of narrative is essential.<sup>112</sup> Cover writes, "[I]aw is the projection of an imagined future upon reality."<sup>113</sup> Just as judicial opinion shapes a country's legal landscape, political rhetoric shapes the public opinion landscape in a society, which serves as the basis for that society's policy decisions.<sup>114</sup> This is why stories told by politicians, especially those running for President of the United States, carry tremendous weight.<sup>115</sup> These anecdotes serve as the basis for policy decisions.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> See Rich, *supra* note 102, at 169 (noting the ironic reality that supposed welfare queen are to be ideal workers and ideal mothers, yet they cannot do so "because the ideal worker, by definition, prioritizes wage labor over family. By contrast, the ideal mother prioritizes family over wage labor.").

<sup>106</sup> See *id.*

<sup>107</sup> See Robert Cover, *Foreword: Nomos and Narratives*, 97 HARV. L. REV. 4, 4 (1983) ("[n]o set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate it and give it meaning."); see generally Thomas Ross, *The Richmond Narratives*, 68 TEX. L. REV. 381 (1989) (examining the narratives in the six opinions authored in the Supreme Court decision of *City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.*).

<sup>108</sup> See generally Milner S. Ball, *Stories of Origin and Constitutional Possibilities*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 2280 (exploring the stories surrounding the making of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution).

<sup>109</sup> See Robert Cover, *Violence and the Word*, 95 YALE L.J. 1601, 1601 (1986) (connecting judicial opinions and violence by asserting, "[a] judge articulates her understanding of a text, and as a result, somebody loses his freedom, his property, his children, even his life . . . [w]hen interpreters have finished their work, they frequently leave behind victims whose lives have been torn apart by these organized, social practices of violence.").

<sup>110</sup> *Id.*

<sup>111</sup> See *id.* at 1607 (using a criminal trial as an example to point out that "[t]he defendant's world is threatened. But he sits, usually quietly, as if engaged in a civil discourse.").

<sup>112</sup> *Id.* at 1604.

<sup>113</sup> *Id.*

<sup>114</sup> See generally Edelman, *supra* note 30 (discussing political rhetoric, public opinion, and policy outcomes).

<sup>115</sup> *Id.*

<sup>116</sup> *Id.*

President Reagan did not win the Republican Presidential nomination in 1976, but his welfare queen rhetoric followed him into the White House when he assumed the presidency in 1980.<sup>117</sup> As cutting welfare was a cornerstone in his campaign, often relying on his famous “woman in Chicago” story, President Reagan directed the federal government to reduce funding for government assistance programs, such as food stamps.<sup>118</sup> The result: a “[p]articularly hard hit...group [was]...households headed by women with children.”<sup>119</sup> President Reagan made this decision despite the fact that sixty-five percent of the women in that category were employed.<sup>120</sup> These cuts, then, meant that a typical mother receiving AFDC experienced a twenty to thirty percent decrease in her monthly income.<sup>121</sup> The effect of President Reagan’s cuts to welfare can be summed up in one poignant quote: “Blacks...suffer[ed] disproportionately from the Reagan programs.”<sup>122</sup>

This reality should serve as a cautionary tale that political rhetoric is not merely a collection of words. Anecdotes told by politicians on the campaign trail, vying for elected office, cannot be viewed in a vacuum.<sup>123</sup> These stories are comprised of words that form, and then stoke, public thought, which serves as the foundation for policy decisions that hurt actual humans, even if the stories told about them are not true.<sup>124</sup>

#### PART IV

##### ***A. The Trump Administration: Picking Up Where the Reagan Administration Left Off***

“[P]eople are taking advantage of the system and then other people aren’t receiving what they really need to live and we think it’s very unfair to them,” said President Donald Trump in a news conference in which he said he would be looking “very, very strongly” at welfare reform.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *Radio Address to the Nation on Welfare Reform*, RONALD REAGAN PRESIDENTIAL LIBR. & MUSEUM (Feb. 15, 1986), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/21586a> (featuring a radio address to the nation from President Reagan where he asserts that “[u]nder the existing rules, a teenage girl who becomes pregnant can make herself eligible for welfare benefits that will set her up in an apartment of her own, provide medical care, and feed and clothe her”). It should also be noted that this example, of a teenage girl being able to obtain safe housing, food, and medical care for herself and her new child, was intended to be an indictment on welfare.

<sup>118</sup> Steven V. Roberts, *Food Stamp Trims Sought by Reagan*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 23, 1981), <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/23/us/food-stamp-trims-sought-by-reagan.html>.

<sup>119</sup> Sheldon Danziger & Robert Haveman, *The Reagan Administration’s Budget Cuts: Their Impact on the Poor*, 14 (May–June 1981), <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc52b.pdf>.

<sup>120</sup> *Id.*

<sup>121</sup> *Id.*

<sup>122</sup> *Id.*

<sup>123</sup> See Kevin Brown, *The Social Construction of a Rape Victim: Stories of African-American Males About the Rape of Desiree Washington*, 1992 U. ILL. L. REV. 997, 997 (1992) (“Becoming an individual in American society . . . is not done in a vacuum. What passes as our individual consciousness is developed under the guidance of cultural patterns and historically created systems of meanings. We are not free agents bound only by our own understanding of what we perceive as reality.”).

<sup>124</sup> See generally Delgado, *supra* note 28.

<sup>125</sup> Clio Chang, *Trump is Resurrecting the Myth of the Welfare Queen*, SPLINTER NEWS (Oct. 16, 2017), <https://splinternews.com/trump-is-resurrecting-the-myth-of-the-welfare-queen-1819508904>.

This rhetoric picks up where Ronald Reagan left off: some people are stealing benefits through dishonesty.<sup>126</sup>

In reality, this narrative led the Trump Administration to implement a rule that is estimated to cut nearly 700,000 people from food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP).<sup>127</sup> The new rule, which has been approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, requires “able-bodied adults without children to work 20 hours a week, or participate in [other programs], to receive SNAP benefits.”<sup>128</sup>

In a column, Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue wrote, “Government dependency has never been the *American dream* . . . [w]e need to encourage people by giving them a helping hand but now allowing it to become an indefinitely giving hand.”<sup>129</sup> Secretary Perdue’s words strike at the values of hard work and personal responsibility. It furthers the myth that somewhere in the United States, there is a large portion of individuals willfully choosing to indefinitely live off of the government.

This perspective, however, overlooks the reality of many individuals receiving assistance through a program like SNAP.<sup>130</sup> It fails to acknowledge the nuances inherent in obtaining government assistance. When the narrative centers around stereotypes, “we forget all the invisible people in the middle of this spectrum of stereotypes: the teacher who has a second job just to make ends meet, the newspaper reporter with an overdrawn bank account, or the social work intern who only got a decent winter coat because her friends and synagogue raised the money.”<sup>131</sup> We cannot lose sight of the real people impacted by political rhetoric and the policy decisions that stem from such rhetoric.

In her book, *Feeding the Crisis: Care and Abandonment in America’s Food Safety Net*, Maggie Dickinson interviews numerous SNAP recipients in New York City, a city that enforced SNAP work requirements during the 2008 recession.<sup>132</sup> In one instance, she spoke with a father of four who lost his job, yet was still enrolled in SNAP.<sup>133</sup> He would send almost all of his monthly \$190 SNAP check to his children who lived with their mother.<sup>134</sup> Another father took the same

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<sup>126</sup> Chang, *supra* note 125.

<sup>127</sup> Maggie Dickinson, *The Ripple Effects of Taking SNAP Benefits From One Person*, THE ATLANTIC (Dec. 10, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/12/trump-snap-food-stamps-cuts/603367/>. At the time of this writing, the Trump Administration decided to go through with its plan despite the growing health and economic concerns stemming from COVID-19.

<sup>128</sup> Elena Gormley, *New Food Stamp Rules Won’t Just Hurt My Clients. They’ll Hurt Struggling Social Workers Like Me.*, VOX (Jan. 3, 2020), <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/1/3/21043551/snap-food-stamps-social-workers-work-requirements>.

<sup>129</sup> Bess Levin, *Trump Administration Moving Forward With April 1 Plan to Kick 700,000 Off Food Stamps Despite Coronavirus Crisis*, VANITY FAIR (Mar. 19, 2020), <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/03/trump-administration-food-stamp-cuts-coronavirus> (emphasis added).

<sup>130</sup> See Dickinson, *supra* note 127.

<sup>131</sup> See Gormley, *supra* note 128.

<sup>132</sup> See Dickinson, *supra* note 127 (noting that in New York City in 2008, single, unemployed men and women had to work at least 80 hours per month to qualify for assistance).

<sup>133</sup> *Id.*

<sup>134</sup> *Id.*

course of action.<sup>135</sup> He feared that if Child Protective Services visited his ex-wife, with whom his son lived, and there was not ample food in the home, then his son would be taken away.<sup>136</sup>

Children and their families are not the only people impacted by these decisions.<sup>137</sup> Dickinson interviewed another man who lived with his elderly mother who had diabetes.<sup>138</sup> After being out of work for more than a year, the government terminated his SNAP benefits.<sup>139</sup> He and his mother then became dependent on food pantries for food.<sup>140</sup> As a consequence, his mother had a difficult time navigating her diabetes because she had less choice regarding the food she could eat.<sup>141</sup>

It can be easy to dismiss the above stories as purely anecdotal, but they offer a glimpse into the reality of tightening work requirements for welfare programs, a reality supported by evidence. SNAP, in its current form, helps one in eight Americans afford a basic diet.<sup>142</sup> Even then, it only correlates to \$1.40 per person per meal.<sup>143</sup> Despite this, the Trump Administration's new rule would further limit benefits.<sup>144</sup> If the rule had been in place in 2018, roughly 3.7 million people, correlating to 2.1 million households, would have been ineligible for food aid.<sup>145</sup> A key aspect in this development, however, is a provision that would alter a long-held practice.<sup>146</sup>

In the past, states issued waivers that allowed SNAP recipients residing in areas with high unemployment to continue receiving aid despite not complying with statutory employment time limits for the program.<sup>147</sup> While a seemingly innocuous adjustment to many, this alteration will have a significant impact on the poor.<sup>148</sup> Thirty-six states currently have waivers in place for areas of high unemployment.<sup>149</sup> In Kentucky, for example, it is estimated that sixty-two percent of the state's low-income population resides in waiver-eligible areas.<sup>150</sup> Some states with high overall unemployment rates, such as California, Louisiana, and New Mexico, have statewide waivers in

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<sup>135</sup> Dickinson, *supra* note 127.

<sup>136</sup> *Id.*

<sup>137</sup> *Id.*

<sup>138</sup> *Id.*

<sup>139</sup> *Id.*

<sup>140</sup> *Id.*

<sup>141</sup> *Id.*

<sup>142</sup> *House Farm Bill's SNAP Cuts, Work Requirements Would Hurt People with Disabilities*, CTR. ON BUDGET & POL'Y PRIORITIES (Last updated July 6, 2018), <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/house-farm-bills-snap-cuts-work-requirements-would-hurt-people-with>.

<sup>143</sup> *Id.*

<sup>144</sup> See generally Kriston Capps, *What the USDA's New Food Stamp Rule Will Do*, CITYLAB (Dec. 4, 2019), <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2019/12/food-stamp-cuts-snap-trump-administration-usda-rule/602986/> (adding that this correlates to a \$4.2 billion decrease in annual benefits).

<sup>145</sup> *Id.*

<sup>146</sup> *Id.*

<sup>147</sup> Ed Bolen & Stacy Dean, *Waivers Add Key State Flexibility to SNAP's Three-Month Time Limit*, CTR. ON BUDGET & POL'Y PRIORITIES (Feb. 6, 2018), <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/waivers-add-key-state-flexibility-to-snaps-three-month-time-limit>.

<sup>148</sup> Capps, *supra* note 144.

<sup>149</sup> *Id.*

<sup>150</sup> *Id.*

place.<sup>151</sup> Because of the new rule, those waivers would no longer be in effect.<sup>152</sup> The damage inflicted on the already downtrodden would be untold.<sup>153</sup> Should one be unfortunate enough to face the likely scenario of being unable to attain consistent employment in an area featuring a high unemployment rate, then their SNAP benefits would be terminated.<sup>154</sup> President Trump's decision strikes directly at the narrative of an undeserving poor. Even if their employment status rests largely outside of their control, some are deemed undeserving of a basic diet.

Another group slighted by these work requirements are local grocers and their employees.<sup>155</sup> Despite droves of politicians vying to eliminate SNAP from the federal government's budget, the program serves a vital purpose in an already vulnerable area of the economy.<sup>156</sup> Grocery stores typically operate at a one to two percent profit margin, which includes their relying on SNAP spending.<sup>157</sup> To put a finer point on it, more than \$24 billion in SNAP benefits were redeemed at supermarkets and grocery stores in 2018.<sup>158</sup> Nationally, this accounts for five percent of all sales at grocery stores that are authorized to accept SNAP benefits.<sup>159</sup> In a sector of the economy operating on already razor-thin margins,<sup>160</sup> the Trump Administration's changes to the SNAP program could be devastating. The result is an unfortunate irony. Individuals employed by grocery stores, often low-income workers receiving SNAP assistance themselves, will be out of work.<sup>161</sup> If they fail to find work quickly, they too could be cut off from access to a consistent diet.

These decisions, and their consequences, flow directly from the stories told at campaign stops, press conferences, and other mediums. Though the words, emphasizing hard work and personal responsibility, appear race-neutral on their face, there are racial ramifications.<sup>162</sup> Yes, statistics serve as undeniable evidence that welfare cuts disproportionately harm Black women, but it must be noted that white men have exclusively shaped the narrative in this story.<sup>163</sup> From Daniel Patrick Moynihan to Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump, the welfare queen myth is the

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<sup>151</sup> Capps, *supra* note 144.

<sup>152</sup> *Id.*

<sup>153</sup> *Id.*

<sup>154</sup> Nathaniel Meyersohn, *Slashing food stamps hurts the poor. It also hurts their supermarkets*, CNN BUSINESS (Jan. 29, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/29/business/grocery-stores-food-stamps-snap/index.html>.

<sup>155</sup> *Id.*

<sup>156</sup> *Id.*

<sup>157</sup> *Id.*

<sup>158</sup> *Id.*

<sup>159</sup> *Id.*

<sup>160</sup> *Id.*

<sup>161</sup> *Id.*

<sup>162</sup> See generally McMillian, *supra* note 88.

<sup>163</sup> See Reginald Leamon Robinson, *Race, Myth and Narrative in the Social Construction of the Black Self*, 40 HOW. L.J. 1, 7 (1996) ("Today, few law professors are willing to acknowledge that a white male perspective has shaped legal academe in a manner which stills invades, wounds, and destroys their colleagues of color.").

creation of white men.<sup>164</sup> This monopoly is crucial.<sup>165</sup> By stifling minority voices, minorities are further pushed into the out-group, the group undeserving of help.<sup>166</sup>

#### PART V

While the Trump Administration has made it a point to attack those on welfare, it is not alone in its efforts.<sup>167</sup> States have followed suit and made moves to impose harsher work requirements for a different, but equally essential, government assistance program: Medicaid.<sup>168</sup>

Medicaid is the largest health insurance program in the United States, providing health coverage for 74 million people.<sup>169</sup> This amounts to one in five Americans.<sup>170</sup> Not only is Medicaid significant in the sense of sheer numbers, but the individuals enrolled in Medicaid are already especially vulnerable.<sup>171</sup> Children account for forty-three percent of enrollees, and the elderly and people with disabilities amount to one in four enrollees.<sup>172</sup>

Though these statistics paint a picture of a valuable, even essential, resource for low-income communities, they still do not tell the full story.<sup>173</sup> Medicaid provides healthcare benefits to eighty-three percent of poor children, forty-eight percent of children with special health care needs, forty-five percent of nonelderly adults with disabilities, and over sixty percent of people living in nursing homes.<sup>174</sup> Perhaps most indicative of Medicaid's essential nature is the fact that it covers nearly half of all births.<sup>175</sup>

Despite being a program exclusively for low-income families, most individuals, six in ten, on Medicaid have a job.<sup>176</sup> An even larger number, seventy-eight percent, live in a household with at least one person working full time.<sup>177</sup> For those that do not work, many are caregivers for other

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<sup>164</sup> See *infra* Parts II–IV.

<sup>165</sup> *Id.*

<sup>166</sup> See Delgado, *supra* note 28.

<sup>167</sup> See generally Erin Brantley & Leighton Ku, *A First Glance at Medicaid Work Requirements in Arkansas: More Than One-Quarter Did Not Meet Requirement*, HEALTH AFF. (Aug. 13, 2018), <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20180812.221535/full/>.

<sup>168</sup> See *id.*

<sup>169</sup> Phil Galewitz, *Medicaid Covers All That? It's the Backstop of America's Ailing Health System*, KAISER HEALTH NEWS (Sept. 25, 2017), <https://khn.org/news/medicaid-has-a-bulls-eye-on-its-back-which-means-no-one-is-entirely-safe/>.

<sup>170</sup> See *id.* (adding, rather unsettlingly, that many Americans are “just a pink slip away from being eligible” for Medicaid).

<sup>171</sup> See Robin Rudowitz, Rachel Garfield, & Elizabeth Hinton, *10 Things to Know About Medicaid: Setting the Facts Straight*, KAISER FAM. FOUND. (Mar. 2019), <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/10-things-to-know-about-medicaid-setting-the-facts-straight/> (“The vast majority of Medicaid enrollees lack access to other affordable health insurance.”).

<sup>172</sup> *Id.*

<sup>173</sup> *Id.*

<sup>174</sup> *Id.*

<sup>175</sup> Phil Galewitz, *Nearly Half of U.S. Births Are Covered By Medicaid, Study Finds*, KAISER HEALTH NEWS (Sept. 3, 2013), <https://khn.org/news/nearly-half-of-u-s-births-are-covered-by-medicaid-study-finds/>.

<sup>176</sup> Donna Rosato, *Who's on Medicaid Might Surprise You*, CONSUMER REP. (June 21, 2017), <https://www.consumerreports.org/medicaid/whos-on-medicaid-might-surprise-you/>.

<sup>177</sup> *Id.*



people.<sup>178</sup> Despite Medicaid’s vast reach into low-income communities across the United States, numerous states, some with already high poverty rates, have sought to limit Medicaid’s reach.<sup>179</sup>

### *A. Arkansas’s Medicaid Work Requirements*

Similar to the Trump Administration’s work requirements for SNAP, Arkansas has sought to add similar standards for Medicaid recipients.<sup>180</sup> Echoing past sentiments regarding work requirements, Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson expressed that the foundational purpose for Medicaid is to “help people get to work.”<sup>181</sup> His rationale finds its basis in the very myth used to attack Black women in the 1980s: people receiving welfare assistance are willfully choosing to remain unemployed.<sup>182</sup> To curb this alleged issue, therefore, citizens must earn their right to see a doctor.

Not only does this ignore the above-mentioned facts regarding Medicaid recipients, but it is also entirely ineffective. In studying the trends of those affected by work requirements, studies found that employment rates declined while uninsured rates went up.<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, the policy rests on the assumption that those impacted by it do not have to overcome any barriers in abiding by the rule or to obtaining employment.<sup>184</sup> For example, lack of consistent transportation, or affordable child care, can create a steep climb to employment.<sup>185</sup> There are also difficulties surrounding the process of logging the necessary hours to preserve one’s benefits.

Casey Copeland, an Arkansas man who once struggled with substance abuse, turned his life around and began volunteering at homelessness and addiction recovery programs near Little Rock, Arkansas.<sup>186</sup> He used these endeavors to gain experience so he could one day become a drug and alcohol counselor.<sup>187</sup> Yet, at the beginning of 2019, he received a letter stating that his Medicaid coverage had been cancelled.<sup>188</sup> This occurred because he failed to properly document the hours he spent volunteering and searching for work in January.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Rosato, *supra* note 176.

<sup>179</sup> See Brantley & Ku, *supra* note 166.

<sup>180</sup> See *id.* (“Those who do not report 80 hours per month of work or other qualifying activities...will lose their Medicaid coverage and be barred from the program for the remainder of the calendar year.”).

<sup>181</sup> *Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson on Medicaid Work Requirements*, NPR (Mar. 29, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/29/707930567/arkansas-gov-asa-hutchinson-on-medicaid-work-requirement>.

<sup>182</sup> See Abigail Abrams, *Should You Have to Work to Get Medicaid? Some Red States Say Yes*, TIME (Mar. 29, 2019), <https://time.com/5560758/medicaid-work-requirements/> (outlining conservative’s arguments that welfare work requirements “will help push the unemployed toward self-sufficiency”).

<sup>183</sup> See Joan Alker, *New Study Finds Arkansas Medicaid Work Requirement Isn’t Working*, GEO. U. HEALTH POL’Y INST: CTR. FOR CHILD. & FAMILIES (June 20, 2019), <https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2019/06/20/new-study-finds-arkansas-medicaid-work-requirement-isnt-working/> (citing to a Harvard study to support this finding).

<sup>184</sup> See *id.* (noting that welfare work requirement policies are “premised on the notion that those affected by it have a perfect understanding of the tradeoffs and do not face any barriers in responding to the new rules or other barriers to getting a new job – such as transportation and job training”).

<sup>185</sup> *Id.*

<sup>186</sup> Abrams, *supra* note 181.

<sup>187</sup> *Id.*

<sup>188</sup> *Id.*

<sup>189</sup> *Id.*

It can be simple for an outside viewer to examine Copeland's situation and suggest that he should have been more responsible. Such a critique is not only cynical, and lacking in empathy, but it also fails to grasp the intricacies in Copeland's life. To gain the experience needed to obtain a full-time job as a drug and alcohol counselor, Copeland was working the equivalent of three part-time jobs, all on a volunteer basis, while trying to find paid work.<sup>190</sup> In the shuffle of a clearly busy and motivated lifestyle, Copeland missed reporting his hours for January.<sup>191</sup> This mistake served as the basis for the termination of his Medicaid coverage.<sup>192</sup>

The seriousness of Copeland's situation runs even deeper. Medicaid allowed him to receive treatment for high blood pressure, low testosterone, and sleep apnea.<sup>193</sup> Upon termination, he had to return the CPAP machine he used to treat his sleep apnea.<sup>194</sup> Without the machine, Copeland knew that his sleep quality would deteriorate.<sup>195</sup> This reality, along with his other conditions that would remain untreated, makes obtaining and sustaining employment more difficult.

Copeland is not an anomaly, and his story exhibits the flaws in Arkansas's work requirement reporting system.<sup>196</sup> First, Arkansas required computer-only reporting.<sup>197</sup> From the outset, this requires consistent access to a computer, internet, and an e-mail account.<sup>198</sup> It also assumes that all recipients will be capable, without assistance, to figure out how to report their hours. Of those subject to the work requirement, eighty-seven percent failed to report enough hours.<sup>199</sup> This number suggests that recipients are struggling with the complexities inherent in reporting their hours as well as understanding which "work activities" qualify for the requirement.<sup>200</sup>

The numerous factors that go into compliance with reporting hours again expose the surface-level and cynical nature of the welfare queen narrative. Humans, and their lives, are complex. Stories like Copeland's are essential to amplifying the realities of those receiving welfare assistance.<sup>201</sup> Yet, instead of examining the hard truths about life in poverty, and its racial implications, politicians, the media, and the United States public have chosen to hold fast to the myth of welfare queens.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Abrams, *supra* note 181.

<sup>191</sup> *Id.*

<sup>192</sup> *Id.*

<sup>193</sup> *Id.*

<sup>194</sup> *Id.*

<sup>195</sup> *Id.*

<sup>196</sup> *Id.*

<sup>197</sup> Max Brantley, *A System Designed to Fail: Arkansas's Medicaid Work Reporting Rule*, ARK. TIMES (Jan. 4, 2019), <https://arktimes.com/arkansas-blog/2019/01/04/a-system-designed-to-fail-arkansas-medicaid-work-reporting-rule>.

<sup>198</sup> *See id.* (adding that even if one has access to these resources, they "still might be stymied by not having an up to date browser").

<sup>199</sup> Jennifer Wagner, *Arkansas Medicaid Beneficiaries Struggling With Reporting Requirement as More Face Work Requirement*, CTR. ON BUDGET & POL'Y PRIORITIES (Feb. 19, 2019), <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/arkansas-medicaid-beneficiaries-struggling-with-reporting-requirement-as-more-face-work>.

<sup>200</sup> *Id.*

<sup>201</sup> Abrams, *supra* note 181.

<sup>202</sup> *See generally* Bryce Covert, *The Myth of the Welfare Queen*, THE NEW REPUBLIC (July 2, 2019), <https://newrepublic.com/article/154404/myth-welfare-queen>.

### ***B. South Carolina's Medicaid Work Requirements***

In following Arkansas's actions, South Carolina also imposed Medicaid work requirements.<sup>203</sup> The new rules are similar to those in Arkansas.<sup>204</sup> Most adults who qualify for Medicaid coverage will have to prove they worked at least eighty hours in a month.<sup>205</sup> If they are unable to meet these hours via traditional employment, then they must engage in other activities like volunteering or job searching.<sup>206</sup> There is a key difference in South Carolina, however, and it begins with its Medicaid program overall.<sup>207</sup>

When Congress passed the Affordable Care Act, it included an expansion of Medicaid eligibility to those with an annual income below 138 percent of the federal poverty line.<sup>208</sup> In 2012, however, the Supreme Court held that states have the choice to opt-out of the Medicaid expansion.<sup>209</sup> South Carolina is one of the few states that has not expanded Medicaid coverage through the Affordable Care Act.<sup>210</sup>

In announcing the work requirement, South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster echoed an all too familiar narrative stating, "There is no reason for anyone who can work not to be working, especially if that person is able-bodied and is receiving public assistance...[w]ithout meaningful work, life loses its joy and meaning."<sup>211</sup> In another statement, Governor McMaster wrote, "we should always endeavor to help South Carolinians in need...away from temporary assistance of government...[a] good, steady job makes everything better."<sup>212</sup> This rhetoric, again, strikes at the core of United States ethos: individual hard work and responsibility.

On their face, Governor McMaster's words seem relatively harmless, but so did President Reagan's during his 1976 campaign stops.<sup>213</sup> Yet, they help further the narrative that a swath of people receiving government assistance are choosing to not work.<sup>214</sup> This rhetoric leads to policy decisions that disproportionately harm Black women.<sup>215</sup> For instance, in South Carolina, the

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<sup>203</sup> Sam Gringlas, *South Carolina Gets Green Light to Impose Medicaid Work Requirements*, NPR (Dec. 13, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/13/787927652/south-carolina-gets-green-light-to-impose-medicaid-work-requirements>.

<sup>204</sup> *Id.*

<sup>205</sup> *Id.*

<sup>206</sup> *Id.*

<sup>207</sup> *Id.*

<sup>208</sup> Sarah Baron, *10 Frequently Asked Questions About Medicaid Expansion*, CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS (Apr. 2, 2013), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/healthcare/news/2013/04/02/58922/10-frequently-asked-questions-about-medicaid-expansion/>.

<sup>209</sup> *Id.*

<sup>210</sup> Gringlas, *supra* note 202.

<sup>211</sup> Kirk Brown, *Medicaid Recipients to Face Work Requirements in SC After Federal Waivers, Governor Says*, GREENVILLE NEWS (Dec. 12, 2019), <https://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/local/2019/12/12/medicaid-recipients-face-work-requirements-sc-after-federal-waivers/4408548002/>.

<sup>212</sup> *Gov. Henry McMaster Directs SCDHHS to Pursue Work Requirements for Medicaid Recipients*, S. C. OFF. OF THE GOVERNOR (Jan. 11, 2018), <https://governor.sc.gov/news/2018-01/gov-henry-mcmaster-directs-scdhhs-pursue-work-requirements-medicaid-recipients>

<sup>213</sup> Covert, *supra* note 201.

<sup>214</sup> *Id.*

<sup>215</sup> *See generally id.*

families most likely to be negatively disadvantaged by the Medicaid work requirements are households headed by Black women.<sup>216</sup>

Of those in South Carolina that rely on Medicaid for health coverage, eighty-five percent are mothers.<sup>217</sup> Thirty-two percent are in the workforce, while forty-six percent are not in the workforce.<sup>218</sup> Only twenty-two percent describe themselves as unemployed.<sup>219</sup> Finally, Black people comprise forty-seven percent of those in South Carolina receiving Medicaid assistance.<sup>220</sup> These statistics make one thing clear, a trend that is not isolated to South Carolina: when politicians advocate for work requirements for welfare programs, Black women are hurt on a disproportionate level.<sup>221</sup>

Similar to Arkansas, there are significant barriers for many attempting to comply with work reporting requirements.<sup>222</sup> For parents seeking jobs, they would have to pay for childcare as well as transportation—costs that cannot be covered under Medicaid.<sup>223</sup> Additionally, South Carolina’s work requirement adds additional red tape that will cause many families to lose coverage due to administrative errors or difficulties.<sup>224</sup> Though South Carolina argues that parents will be healthier if they have jobs, citing studies supposedly proving the correlation between unemployment and higher mortality and lower levels of physical and mental health,<sup>225</sup> that does not tell the full story.

The state cited a study in Kansas that found adults who receive disability payments and work at least part-time have better health habits, a better quality of life, and lower monthly Medicaid expenditures than those who are not working.<sup>226</sup> Those researchers noted, however, that their findings show a correlation, not causation.<sup>227</sup> The reality is likely the opposite: those who are healthier are better able to work.<sup>228</sup>

Recent research shows that poor health meant workers were more likely to lose jobs and that access to affordable health insurance was essential to finding and maintaining employment.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> See Joan Alker, *South Carolina Becomes First State to Impose Harmful Work Requirements Primarily on Poor Parents*, GEO. U. HEALTH POL’Y INST.: CTR. FOR CHILD. & FAMILIES (Dec. 12, 2019), <https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2019/12/12/trump-administration-doubles-down-on-harmful-work-requirements-approves-south-carolina-to-become-first-state-to-apply-them-exclusively-to-poor-parents/> (“[T]he families who will be disproportionately harmed are more likely to be households headed by women, African American, and living in rural areas.”).

<sup>217</sup> *Low-Income Families with Children Will Be Harmed by South Carolina’s proposed Medicaid Work Reporting Requirement*, GEO. U. HEALTH POL’Y INST.: CTR. FOR CHILD. & FAMILIES, at 2 (June 2018), <https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2018/06/05/low-income-families-with-children-will-be-harmed-by-south-carolinas-proposed-medicaid-work-requirement/>.

<sup>218</sup> *Id.*

<sup>219</sup> *Id.*

<sup>220</sup> *Id.*

<sup>221</sup> *Id.*

<sup>222</sup> *Id.*

<sup>223</sup> See *id.* (outlining various barriers to employment experienced by many low-income individuals).

<sup>224</sup> *Id.* (noting that many Medicaid recipients could lose coverage to due administrative and technical errors).

<sup>225</sup> *Id.*

<sup>226</sup> *Id.*

<sup>227</sup> *Id.*

<sup>228</sup> *Id.*

<sup>229</sup> *Id.*

In fact, workers who received coverage through Medicaid found that it made it easier to work.<sup>230</sup> In Ohio, fifty-two percent of residents enrolled in Medicaid claimed it was easier to secure and maintain employment because of their health coverage.<sup>231</sup> In Michigan, nearly three-quarters of those out of work are living with a chronic health condition.<sup>232</sup> Cutting these individuals off from their health coverage will only make it more difficult to find, and maintain, employment.<sup>233</sup>

One truth to be derived from these statistics is that those fixated on seeing welfare recipients obtain employment would be better suited to ensure all welfare recipients have access to basic healthcare. Yet, a deeply entrenched barrier, the welfare queen myth, stands in the way of this solution. Because the United States public, through its politicians and the media, have been misled to believe that welfare cheating is a serious problem, the idea of generous welfare distribution seems outlandish. This is why counter-narratives, real stories of those receiving government assistance, must be told.

## PART VI

While there are numerous avenues to advocate for those receiving welfare and to dismantle the welfare queen myth, this paper proposes two solutions. First, the federal government and all state governments should cease work requirements for welfare programs as they are ineffective. Second, the media, politicians, and the public must establish a counter-narrative to the welfare queen myth.

### ***A. Welfare Work Requirements: An Ineffective Solution to a Non-Existent Problem***

As established throughout this paper, the rationale behind work requirements for welfare programs is that they will incentivize recipients to find employment and no longer be dependent upon the government for assistance.<sup>234</sup> The thinking, put simply, is that if one's healthcare is threatened, then they will finally decide to find a job.<sup>235</sup> The statistics demonstrating that the vast majority of welfare recipients are working, or caring for another person, are littered throughout this paper, so I will not delve any further into that topic.<sup>236</sup> Instead, I want to analyze how employment becomes more difficult when one is not healthy or does not have access to food. This undercuts the rationale behind work requirements, which will support my recommendation that federal and state governments abandon such provisions.

Despite being the wealthiest country in the world, access to food is still a struggle for many in the United States.<sup>237</sup> This is especially true for communities of color.<sup>238</sup> While there are obvious

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<sup>230</sup> GEO. U. HEALTH POL'Y INST., *supra* note 217, at 2.

<sup>231</sup> *Id.*

<sup>232</sup> *Id.*

<sup>233</sup> *Id.*

<sup>234</sup> *See supra* Part IV.

<sup>235</sup> *Id.*

<sup>236</sup> *Id.*

<sup>237</sup> Judith Bell et al., *Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters: A Review of the Research*, THE FOOD TRUST (2013), [http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media\\_items/access-to-healthy-food.original.pdf](http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media_items/access-to-healthy-food.original.pdf).

<sup>238</sup> *Id.* ("From 1990 through February 2013, many studies have documented how low-income communities and communities of color have less access to healthy food than higher-income and less diverse communities.").

reasons for why humans need to eat, a lack of consistent access to food also has employment implications.<sup>239</sup> Food has a direct impact on cognitive performance.<sup>240</sup> Studies that have proven this, for the record, were comparing healthy versus unhealthy foods; they did not analyze the impact of no food or minimal food.<sup>241</sup> If what humans eat directly impacts their cognitive ability, then going without food is severely damaging to one's abilities.<sup>242</sup> This makes it increasingly difficult for a person to not only obtain employment but to maintain that employment. This undercuts the very reason for removing SNAP benefits in the first place.

Perhaps more alarmingly is the correlation between food insecurity and health, which directly implicates Medicaid.<sup>243</sup> Low-income areas threatened by food insecurity already have fewer health resources than their counterparts.<sup>244</sup> Subsequently, the health implications are massive. Adults in these areas are at greater risk for diabetes, heart diseases, stroke, disability, poor oral health, and, perhaps most frighteningly, premature mortality.<sup>245</sup> Without healthcare coverage, adults are more likely to forgo essential medical care due to cost.<sup>246</sup> Cutting one's access to a doctor through Medicaid will only exacerbate these issues. The less healthy someone is the harder maintaining a job will be. This, like revoking SNAP, undercuts the very inspiration for Medicaid work requirements.

Health is essential for being a contributing member of the workforce. Without access to food and medical care, staying healthy enough to maintain a job becomes increasingly difficult. This is why work requirements for welfare programs undercut their own rationale. Instead, states and the federal government should move away from work requirements and towards expanding the welfare safety net.

### ***B. The Power and Importance of Counter-Narrative***

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the power of predominant public narratives and how such narratives have a direct correlation to policy decisions.<sup>247</sup> These stories serve as the foundation for in-groups to justify the world as it is.<sup>248</sup> When the idea that those on welfare are

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<sup>239</sup> Ron Friedman, *What You Eat Affects Your Productivity*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Oct. 17, 2014), <https://hbr.org/2014/10/what-you-eat-affects-your-productivity>.

<sup>240</sup> *Id.*

<sup>241</sup> *Id.*; Tom Waterfal, *The Scientific Link Between Healthy Eating and Productivity*, CHARTERED MGMT. INST. (Aug. 14, 2018), <https://www.managers.org.uk/insights/news/2018/august/the-scientific-link-between-healthy-eating-and-productivity>.

<sup>242</sup> See Friedman, *supra* note 238.

<sup>243</sup> Bell, *supra* note 236.

<sup>244</sup> *The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being*, FOOD ACTION RESEARCH CTR., at 1 (Dec. 2017), <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf>.

<sup>245</sup> *Id.*

<sup>246</sup> Jennifer Tolbert et al., *Key Facts about the Uninsured Population*, KFF (Dec. 13, 2019), <https://www.kff.org/uninsured/issue-brief/key-facts-about-the-uninsured-population>.

<sup>247</sup> See *supra* Part III.

<sup>248</sup> See Delgado, *supra* note 28, at 2413 (“Rather, it is the prevailing *mind-set* by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is—that is, with whites on top and browns and Blacks at the bottom.”).

cheating the system has been entrenched in our minds, coming from the country's most powerful, for numerous decades, the narrative can be hard to counter.<sup>249</sup>

Because of this reality, stories and counter-narratives are essential. Narratives established by the in-group support society's current makeup, but stories told by the out-group subvert that reality.<sup>250</sup> In his article, *Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative*, Richard Delgado uses civil rights as an example.<sup>251</sup> He writes that, in this context, the majority view holds that "any inequality between Blacks and whites is because of either cultural lag or inadequate enforcement of currently existing beneficial laws."<sup>252</sup> Yet, for those in the out-group, the minority, "the principal instrument of their subordination" is neither of these explanations.<sup>253</sup> Instead, Delgado asserts that "it is the prevailing mind-set" that justifies the world in its current form, which then stifles a majority desire to push for progress in civil rights.<sup>254</sup>

This is essential because the prevailing, dominant views of the public are rarely examined. Delgado paints the picture of eyeglasses used to interpret the world, only to "rarely examine them for themselves."<sup>255</sup> This inherited view, then, makes the current social reality appear natural and unbiased.<sup>256</sup> The powerful remain unthreatened, the majority stays comfortable, and the minority is left to fend for itself. The cure, Delgado proposes, is storytelling.<sup>257</sup>

Storytelling, establishing a counter-narrative to the welfare queen myth, is this paper's second recommendation. For decades, politicians, including Presidents, have had a monopoly on establishing the narrative about those on welfare.<sup>258</sup> Their stories, often filled with lies and exaggerations, have gone largely unchallenged by fellow politicians, the media, and the public.<sup>259</sup> With much of social reality being constructed through stories, it is now time to establish a counter-narrative to the welfare queen myth to paint a new reality.

This new picture of those on welfare can be a story of resilience. It should include the stories of hardships endured by my former clients in Tennessee. The public would hear of mothers balancing work, a home, and a special needs son. Rather than anecdotes and narratives of laziness, the public would be exposed to the reality of trying to find work while suffering from a physical or mental disability. Even deeper, the public could learn of the everyday barriers to employment such as expensive child care, unreliable transportation, and the consequences of even minor criminal convictions.

Earlier in this paper, I shared Casey Copeland's story.<sup>260</sup> While *Time*, the publishing outlet, and other sources that have taken steps to amplify a counter-narrative regarding those on welfare,

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<sup>249</sup> See *supra* Part III.

<sup>250</sup> See Delgado, *supra* note 28, at 2413 ("[S]tories of outgroups aim to subvert...ingroup reality.").

<sup>251</sup> *Id.*

<sup>252</sup> *Id.*

<sup>253</sup> *Id.*

<sup>254</sup> *Id.*

<sup>255</sup> *Id.*

<sup>256</sup> *Id.*

<sup>257</sup> *Id.*

<sup>258</sup> See *supra* Parts III–IV.

<sup>259</sup> *Id.*

<sup>260</sup> Abrams, *supra* note 181.

should be commended, more must be done.<sup>261</sup> The current media coverage of poverty is abysmal.<sup>262</sup> A study in 2014 found that poverty constitutes less than two hundredths of a percent of lead media coverage.<sup>263</sup> Despite 50 million people living below the poverty line, during the 2012 election, only seventeen of 10,489 news stories discussed poverty in any depth.<sup>264</sup>

While there are numerous reasons for this phenomenon, there is one rather blunt reason: poverty is depressing.<sup>265</sup> The United States public, as a whole, is not believed to be interested in such stories.<sup>266</sup> The basis for this is the American Dream and the ethos of hard work and personal responsibility.<sup>267</sup> Maggie Bowman, a filmmaker who produced a series on low-wage workers, suggests that the entrenched narratives of the American Dream have altered the public reception of reporting on the poor.<sup>268</sup> She asserts, “[t]he personal responsibility narrative is so strong in America: that if you haven’t been successful in this country, you must’ve done something wrong...[p]eople think this is really a question of choice.”<sup>269</sup>

The conversation is trending in the right direction though. Various writers and editors for major news outlets, such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Reporter*, have started to place a stronger emphasis on reporting stories on poverty.<sup>270</sup> One reporter even went so far as to claim, “I think we are entering a golden age of reporting about poverty.”<sup>271</sup> Some credit the improvement in poverty coverage to the 2008 economic crash, which made the reality of poverty more tangible for a broader audience.<sup>272</sup> The issue, however, is not necessarily a lack of information, but rather how the stories of those in poverty are told.<sup>273</sup> These stories are essential to shifting the narrative on the poor, on those who receive government assistance.

The key to telling these stories, then, is the key to eradicating poverty overall: immersion.<sup>274</sup> Media reporters, as well as community organizers, legal advocates, and any person seeking to take up a role in the fight against poverty must be careful not to “parachute in” to low-income communities.<sup>275</sup> Not only does a strong trust need to be established for stories of poverty

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<sup>261</sup> See generally Katia Savchuk, *Poor Journalism: Is Media Coverage of the Poor Getting Better or Worse*, CALIFORNIA MAG. (Apr. 6, 2016), <https://alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/just-in/2016-04-06/poor-journalism-media-coverage-poor-getting-better-or-worse>.

<sup>262</sup> *Id.*

<sup>263</sup> Monica Roth, *Lack of Media Coverage on Poverty*, BORGEN MAG. (Aug. 6, 2014), <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/lack-media-coverage-poverty/>.

<sup>264</sup> *Id.*

<sup>265</sup> Savchuk, *supra* note 260.

<sup>266</sup> See *id.* (quoting Barbara Raab, a Ford Foundation program officer, who said, “Covering the poor doesn’t seem to be a beat that many or most reporters aspire to. It’s not generally the best rising stars are promoted into. *Audiences are often perceived not to be very interested in these stories . . .*”) (emphasis added).

<sup>267</sup> *Id.*

<sup>268</sup> *Id.*

<sup>269</sup> *Id.*

<sup>270</sup> *Id.*

<sup>271</sup> *Id.*

<sup>272</sup> See *id.* (hypothesizing that because the 2008 economic crash made poverty a reality for more people, stories on the subject became more relatable to a broader audience, thus leading to an uptick in poverty coverage in the media).

<sup>273</sup> *Id.*

<sup>274</sup> *Id.*

<sup>275</sup> *Id.*



to be told effectively, but these families are also deserving of advocates who are in the fight for the long-haul. For these stories to be meaningful, and establish a counter-narrative, they must be portrayed honestly. Susan Smith Richardson, an editor and publisher of *The Chicago Reporter*, states, “[n]obody’s life is a symbol...[i]t’s a question of telling stories that have context, historical perspective,...and are authentic.”<sup>276</sup> For too long, the poor have been a symbol of laziness, dishonesty, and lack of personal responsibility. It is now time for the media, politicians, and the public to fight back against this myth. To do so, we must share the stories of those impacted by poverty and the government’s policy decisions related to poverty.

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<sup>276</sup> Savchuk, *supra* note 260.