

1500-
1865

SLAVERY

Between 1500 and 1866, nearly 15.5 million Africans were captured and enslaved by the Portuguese, British, and French and brought to the Americas. When the **first ship of enslaved Africans landed** in the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, enslaved Africans, and Native Americans were forced into labor by their white oppressors. White enslavers portrayed Black people as inherently lazy to justify this mandatory and exploitative labor. **These beliefs** continue to support work requirement policies today, as those requirements are premised on the assumption that people do not want to work and must be coerced by public policy.

1866

BLACK CODES

In 1865, President Andrew Johnson implemented his **Reconstruction plan**, which allowed the white South to regulate the transition from slavery to freedom and authorized the creation of new state governments. As a result, nearly all Southern states enacted their own version of **black codes**, laws designed to limit the freedoms and rights of Black people while continuing to exploit them as a labor source under the **idea** that, “[I]f you’re going to be free, you should be working.” These codes restricted the types of jobs Black people could have, the kinds of property they could own, and more.

1866

VAGRANCY ACT

On January 15, 1866, the General Assembly of Virginia passed the **Vagrancy Act of 1866**, forcing any person who appeared to be unemployed or homeless into employment for a term of up to three months. Formally known as the Act Providing for the Punishment of Vagrants, the Vagrancy Act upheld the idea that if “vagrants” ran away and were recaptured, they would be forced to work without compensation.

The Vagrancy Act of 1866 criminalized freed people who were out of work or employed in jobs that whites did not recognize. It was used to restrict the rights and freedoms of newly freed individuals, making it even more challenging for them to live independently on their own terms. This oppressive law remained in effect until 1904.

1870s

CONVICT LEASING

In April 1868, prison **convict leasing** began in Georgia as a system of involuntary servitude of incarcerated persons to fill positions on mines, railways, and large plantations in the Southern states. Convict leasing reduced wage and employment rates among the freed population of men and women looking for paid work because of the **competition** created by this system. Like the Black codes, convict leasing was another way to force Black people to work for little or no pay.

FREEDMEN'S BUREAU

Established by the federal government, the Freedmen's Bureau was meant to provide shelter, aid, clothing, and medical services to displaced Southerners. It also forced freed people to work for their former enslavers through denials of aid and exploitative labor contracts.

Some senators argued that the Freedmen's Bureau would make formerly enslaved people and Southern refugees dependent on the government, effectively prolonging their servitude. This argument is still used by policymakers and politicians to undermine access to and sufficiency of public programs and prop up work requirement policies.

MOTHER'S PENSION PROGRAMS

Mother's pension programs were created to provide subsidies, such as cash payments, for dependent children who were fatherless or without an adult male income due to death, abandonment, or poor health. However, white widows were always the largest users and primary beneficiaries of these programs.

In Southern states where most Black families lived, mothers' pension programs were largely not created or operational. Those that did exist barred Black families from receiving these pensions and instead forced Black women into low-paid, unstable jobs because they were only deemed worthy of aid conditioned on work.

GREAT MIGRATION

During the Great Migration, approximately [six million](#) ↗ Black people left the South and moved to other states in the hopes of escaping racial violence, pursuing economic and educational opportunities, and finding freedom from Jim Crow.

Many Black families and approximately [500,000 Black workers](#) ↗ moved north. In response, cities including Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia began to adopt work requirement policies like those found in the South.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression reinforced the framework for “deserving” and “undeserving” individuals.

While white officials distributed relief in the form of food—for example, the [1939 Food Stamp Program](#) ↗ (FSP) provided subsidized surplus commodity foods—they argued that Black people did not need as many resources as white Americans. As such, FSP held a purchase requirement that often excluded those with low incomes. This requirement meant that individuals had to purchase stamps or coupons to buy food at retail stores, which effectively excluded many Black people or individuals with low incomes who couldn't afford to do so.



1872

EARLY
1900s

1910-
1970

1929-
1941

NEW DEAL POLICIES

1930-
1939

Many New Deal programs like the Work Progress Administration (WPA) failed to address the structural inequalities and labor segmentation affecting Black people. The WPA limited Black women's employment opportunities to domestic service training programs and sewing programs, neither of which paid well. WPA programs helped white women seek higher paying opportunities in industries like clerical work, gardening, and nursing.

SOCIAL SECURITY ACT

1935

In 1935 Black Americans made up 4 percent of the federal government's workforce, and as much as 20 percent of the workforce in agencies like Government Printing Office. Yet, because of the Social Security Act's explicit exclusion of domestic and agricultural workers, 87 percent of all Black women and 55 percent of all Black workers were excluded from Social Security protection and benefits.

AID TO DEPENDENT CHILDREN

1935

States excluded Black mothers from full participation in Aid to Dependent Children (later renamed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC), an extension of the state-operated mother's pension programs. AFDC was designed to exclude Black families through means like "suitable home clauses" and coerce Black people into working low-wage jobs. States established residency requirements in the Aid to Dependent Children program that barred Black Americans migrating from the South from enrolling in the program.

AFDC AND THE WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1950-
1960s

Media coverage and public debate about the economic status of Black people laid the blame at Black people's feet. Policymakers associated Black people with public assistance and the expectation that Black women, regardless of their circumstances, should be employed while receiving government aid. Welfare debates in both these decades and the 1990s also targeted non-working single mothers, with many critics arguing that providing cash benefits to these mothers would disincentivize employment and marriage.

"Man in the house" rules were enforced for welfare recipients, including those in public housing. Intended to promote social norms around marriage and who deserved assistance, these rules excluded children who qualified for benefits from receiving them if their mother lived with an able-bodied male but was not married. Welfare workers were required to make unannounced visits to determine if fathers were living in the home and whether to close cases and discontinue welfare checks.

BATTLE OF NEWBURGH

The City Manager of Newburgh, N.Y. attempted to impose work requirements on welfare recipients in New York state, especially Black residents who had come north as part of the Great Migration. The plan was abandoned after reporters revealed the cruelty surrounding the proposal. Despite the setback and negative attention, city officials persisted in harassing and denying assistance to families in need.

1961

AFDC'S FIRST FEDERAL WORK REQUIREMENT

Congress established the first national Work Incentive Program (WIN) in AFDC, requiring states to refer parents with children over age six to work and training programs.

1967-
1968

WORKFARE PROGRAMS AND “WELFARE QUEEN” TROPE

The trope of the “Welfare Queen” surfaces from the life of Linda Taylor, a Black woman who was convicted of welfare fraud in 1977. Taylor became a “villain” and thief in the eyes of many white Americans. During his unsuccessful 1976 presidential campaign, Ronald Regan defended his plan to cut AFDC and other social programs by leveraging Taylor’s story and other racist myths to gain support from working-class whites for these cuts and propagate the stereotype of Black indolence and criminality. These same false narratives and tactics are used to support cutting public benefits today.

The 1977 Food Stamp Program expanded access to food assistance nationwide, but in the early 1980s the Reagan Administration pushed for major cuts to this and other benefits programs. The administration also pushed for stricter work requirements in AFDC and experimental mandatory work programs funded by Congress.

1981

OMNIBUS BUDGET RECONCILIATION ACT

The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 cut AFDC spending by limiting eligibility in ways that disproportionately affected Black mothers. The changes caused approximately one in six families to lose some or all their benefits.

1981

1988

MANDATORY WORK WITH THE JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND BASIC SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAM (JOBS)

The bipartisan Family Support Act of 1988 significantly expanded work services in AFDC through the **JOBS program** that replaced WIN and made participation mandatory. Mothers with children older than three were required to participate in work, education, or training programs. If they did not meet these requirements, their benefits or grants would be reduced.

1992-
1996

BILL CLINTON'S "ENDING WELFARE AS WE KNOW IT" CAMPAIGN

Former President Clinton promised to eliminate the 61-year-old **federal entitlement** in Roosevelt's New Deal, replacing it with time limits, block grants, and work requirements. Though it was marketed as a way to reduce federal costs, Clinton's campaign ultimately resulted in **1.1 million** more children living in poverty. Rather than blaming the systemic inequities that existed, this campaign relied on harmful racial narratives of poverty as an individual choice, and rising taxes were tied to costs of paying welfare checks to those who are **"not carrying their own weight."**

1996

PRWORA AND AFDC REPLACED WITH TANF BLOCK GRANT

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) ended welfare as an entitlement program and required recipients to begin working after two years of receiving benefits. Congress replaced AFDC with TANF, which has stricter work requirements in cash assistance than any previous program. PRWORA also created the three-month time limit for SNAP for non-working adults not living with minors.

2015-
2016

AFDC AND THE WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT

When TANF was enacted in 1996, **68 out of every 100 families** living in poverty received benefits. By 2015, that number had dropped to 23 out of 100 families. The Government Accountability Office has calculated that **87 percent** of the TANF caseload's decline from 1995 to 2005 was due to fewer eligible families participating due to **harsh and unreasonable TANF work requirements.**

Research conducted by the **Center on Budget and Policy Priorities** has found that the implementation of the three-month SNAP time limit on benefits for unemployed adults who didn't have children living with them resulted in an estimated 500,000 child-free adults losing food assistance at some point in 2016.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION APPROVES FIRST WORK REQUIREMENTS IN MEDICAID AND SNAP

On January 11, 2018, the Center for Medicaid and Chip Services (CMS) [issued guidance](#) [↗] inviting states to request Section 1115 waivers that imposed work and reporting requirements (referred to as “community engagement”) as a condition of Medicaid eligibility for non-elderly, non-pregnant adult beneficiaries who are eligible on a basis other than disability.

On December 5, 2019, the Trump Administration finalized a [rule](#) [↗] that would take away SNAP from people struggling to find or sustain work. This new rule required millions of recipients to report their work hours each week and put more adults at risk of losing their food assistance if they did not meet SNAP work requirements. This was the first of three proposed rules that would limit access to SNAP.

A CONTINUOUS PUSH FOR WORK REQUIREMENTS

Recent policies and legislation continue to advocate for the incorporation of work requirements into public benefits programs. Recently, Republicans used a [debt ceiling bill](#) [↗] to push work requirements requiring more Americans with low incomes to work to receive government benefits. Within this bill, the [Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023](#) [↗] (FRA) expands SNAP ABAWD (Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents) work requirements for older adults 50-54 and creates new exemptions for vets, unhoused individuals, and former foster youth. FRA also [requires](#) [↗] states to report employment and education outcomes in TANF programs.

This reflects a lingering notion that individuals must demonstrate their worthiness to receive assistance. However, it's important to recognize that the historical roots of work requirements are steeped in racism, classism, and ignorance, as evidenced in this timeline.



2018-
2019

2020-
BEYOND