


# The Dangerous Roots Feeding the Narrative about Fraud in Basic Needs Programs

By Teon Hayes and Jesse Fairbanks | June 2026

## Understanding the Conservative Narrative

Harmful and false narratives about people who use basic needs programs emerged in the 1900s and continue to influence policymaking to this day, including the idea of “welfare fraud.” Policymakers interested in limiting government spending have long alleged that basic needs programs are riddled with “fraud.” In their view, “fraud” is perpetrated by people with low incomes who “take advantage” of programs that are funded with taxpayer dollars. These policymakers claim that people who use basic needs programs simply “don’t want to work,” implying that a family can afford housing, child care, food, and health insurance just by working one minimum-wage job.

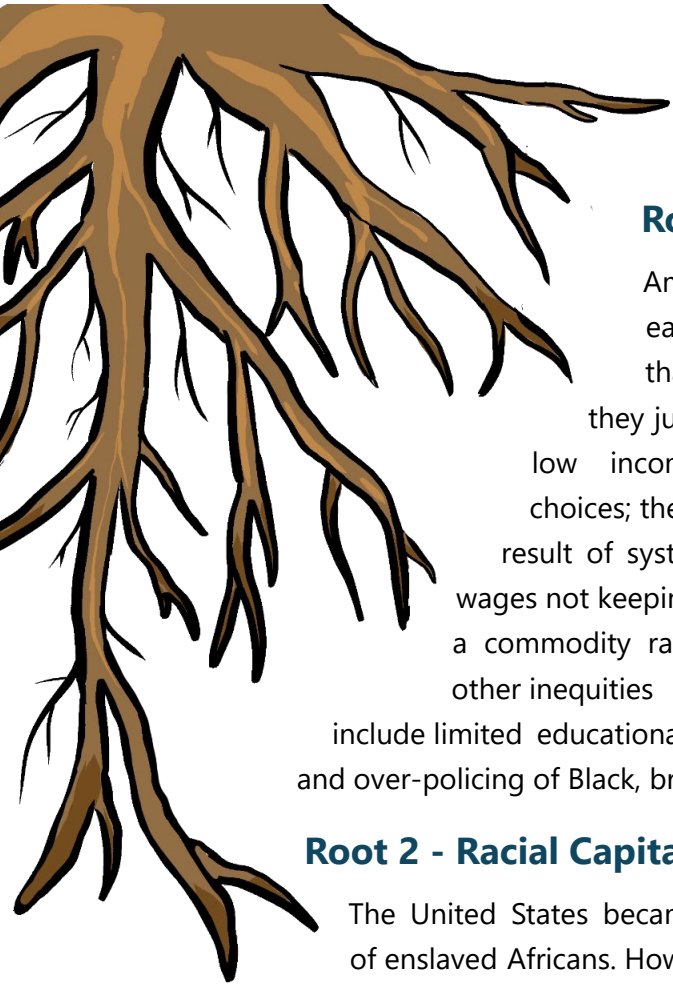


**Fraud** is the willful misrepresentation of facts for personal gain, and it's most often committed by people with institutional power.

Recent policy changes that have been proposed to address “fraud” in basic needs programs include new eligibility restrictions, verification processes, work reporting requirements, performance metrics, and databases. Such proposals are dangerous and will lead to millions of eligible people losing their benefits. Layer upon layer of “anti-fraud” measures are redundant. Adding unnecessary procedural barriers to the application process makes accessing these programs a headache for everyday people. Proposals such as stricter verification processes are also expensive for states to implement, and they don’t prevent improper payments

**Improper payments** are unintentional mistakes caused by agency processing errors, missing paperwork, or other miscommunications. They include both overpayments and underpayments.

There are three powerful beliefs at the root of narratives about widespread “fraud” in basic needs programs. Each one relies on antiquated, racist ideas of who does or doesn’t deserve help from the government to sustain itself.



## Root 1 - Meritocracy and Individualism

Americans are taught that people with resources and wealth earned their money through hard work and sacrifice. This fantasy that any individual has the power to achieve economic mobility if they just “try hard enough” has led some to believe that people with low incomes can't afford basic needs because of individual choices; therefore, no one deserves help from government. Poverty is the result of systemic failures outside of an individual's control, like stagnant wages not keeping up with rising costs in an economy that views basic needs as a commodity rather than a public good. Structural barriers drive racial and other inequities in economic hardship. Examples of structural barriers include limited educational opportunities, discrimination in labor and housing markets, and over-policing of Black, brown and immigrant communities.

## Root 2 - Racial Capitalism

The United States became a powerful capitalist country because of the unpaid labor of enslaved Africans. However, many Americans still hold racist assumptions about why Black people experience poverty at higher rates than white people. From the “Sambo” stereotype in early 1900s minstrel shows to the “*welfare queen*” on the news in the 1970s, racist narratives have long portrayed Black communities as more likely to misuse public resources. Black people disproportionately experience poverty because the federal government failed to deliver reparations to formerly enslaved people, continued to discriminate against their descendants, and allowed people to terrorize Black communities. Black Americans were even excluded from [America's first basic needs programs](#), which created the white middle class.

## Root 3 - Nativism and Colonialism

The United States expedited efforts to steal Indigenous land after it became an official country in 1776. Soon after, America developed its first immigration laws restricting citizenship to free white people, primarily to deny rights to Black and Indigenous people. America's immigration policies over the past 250 years have continued to discriminate against people of color, justifying exclusions with false claims that immigrants will threaten people's jobs and consume finite resources. Many Americans find this scarcity narrative compelling because it allows them to villainize and attack a group of people, rather than a system. Often immigrants have fled countries that [faced destabilization because of intervention](#) from countries in the West, like [the United States](#). Immigrant communities enliven American culture and [contribute significantly to the economy](#), all while [being denied access](#) to major basic needs programs.

## Advancing a Progressive Narrative

Developing arguments that counter harmful dominant narratives requires us to treat the soil that nourishes American culture. We must counter individualist, racist, and nativist narratives about “fraud” in basic needs programs at the root.

Gardeners depend on a few different techniques to improve soil quality. One technique with [roots in Indigenous cultures](#) involves growing complementary crops that minimally compete for resources, known as intercropping. When done correctly, this practice can replenish the soil.

To popularize a progressive narrative about fraud and its impact on basic needs programs, as well as refocus America’s cultural priority on meeting people’s basic needs, we need to mix-and-match crops that appeal to different audiences. However, we can’t forget to plant the crops that are foundational to challenging the dominant narrative at its roots.

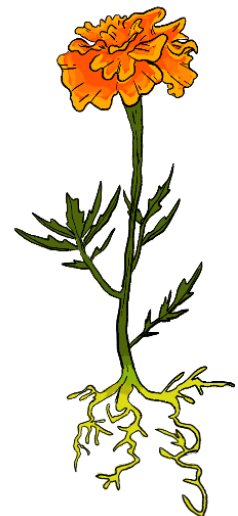


### Aerate the Soil: Tell the Truth and Present an Alternative Worldview

These talking points challenge the belief that recipient-level “fraud” in basic needs programs is a relevant issue. Policymakers constructed this lie to sow public distrust in the programs. They scapegoat Black and immigrant communities to justify policy changes that hurt us all, including the middle class. But using billions of dollars to surveil benefit recipients won’t make groceries, housing, and gas affordable for everyday people. Instead, the government can invest tax dollars into public goods and services that help people afford their basic needs and achieve economic mobility. Every person deserves a stable home, food, and health care.

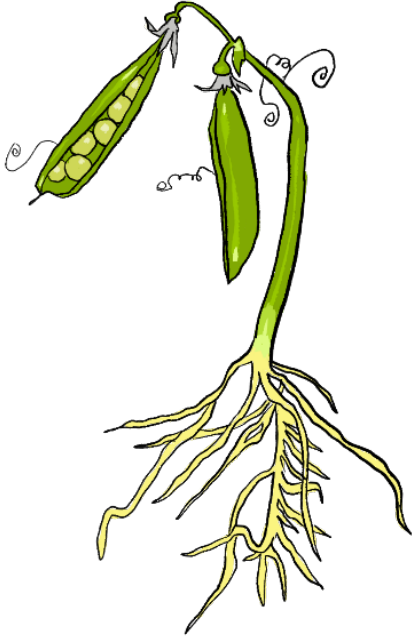
### Fend Off Pests: Name Systemic Actors Committing Actual Fraud

These talking points narrow the public’s definition of fraud. The dominant narrative depends on an ambiguous definition of the term that incriminates people experiencing poverty. On the contrary, fraud is the act of obtaining something valuable through willful misrepresentation, and it’s committed by people with the institutional power to abuse government resources. Nearly 1,000 millionaires have not filed their tax returns and owe an estimated [\\$34 billion](#) in taxes. Health care companies commit millions in fraud through schemes like [upcoding or unbundling](#) every year. Wealthy people and



corporations who avoid paying their taxes withhold critical revenue from our schools, libraries, and core basic needs programs like Medicaid.

## **Turn Nitrogen into Nutrients: Differentiate Fraud from Unintentional Mistakes Then Pivot to Real Solutions**



These talking points undermine the core argument that people with low incomes take advantage of basic needs programs. These programs can be challenging to navigate because of complicated rules and excessive paperwork requirements. In fact, so much documentation is required that eligible people are often deterred from applying. Because application and recertification processes are burdensome, people can unintentionally make mistakes. Adding more steps to the process may even lead to an increase in improper denials as state workers struggle to implement new rules. If the goal is to prevent application errors, policymakers should streamline programs by, for example, aligning eligibility criteria across programs so people can navigate them more easily.