

The Long Arc of Work-Conditioned Benefits

How History Echoes in Contemporary Policy

The question of whether assistance should be conditioned on work is older than the United States. Every argument advanced in favor of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act's Medicaid work requirements has been made before, often in nearly identical language, across four centuries of Anglo-American welfare policy. Every criticism has been articulated as well. Contemporary debates about "dignity through contribution" and "reciprocal obligation" echo arguments from Tudor England's workhouses, Victorian charity organizations, Reconstruction-era labor contracts, and 1996 welfare reform. Understanding this history does not determine what policy should be, but it clarifies what we are actually arguing about when we argue about work requirements.

The patterns that recur across centuries reveal something important: the tension between unconditional care for the vulnerable and expectations of behavioral conformity is not a modern invention or a partisan divide. It is a permanent feature of societies that acknowledge some collective responsibility for the poor while also valuing individual industry and self-reliance. ***The history of work-conditioned benefits is the history of societies negotiating the boundary between solidarity and moral judgment.***

English Poor Laws and the Colonial Inheritance

The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 codified distinctions that would shape Anglo-American welfare policy for four centuries. Parliament established three categories of the poor: the "***impotent poor***" who could not work due to age, illness, or disability and deserved charitable support; the "***able-bodied poor***" who were willing to work but could not find employment and deserved assistance finding labor; and the "***idle poor***" or "vagrants" who could work but refused to do so and deserved punishment rather than support.

This tripartite classification system embedded moral judgment into the administrative structure of poor relief. Local parishes, through appointed Overseers of the Poor, were charged with distinguishing deserving from undeserving cases. The system assumed that poverty among able-bodied adults reflected moral deficiency unless proven otherwise. Work was both a test of character and a condition for continued assistance.

The workhouse emerged as the institutional expression of this philosophy. Those seeking relief could be required to enter a workhouse where they would labor in exchange for food and shelter. The workhouse served multiple functions: it provided assistance to the genuinely destitute, it deterred the "unworthy" through its deliberately harsh conditions, and it made visible the separation between respectable poverty and moral failure. As one eighteenth-century policy declared, conditions in the workhouse must be ***less eligible*** than the worst circumstances outside it, so that no one would choose relief who had any alternative.

The principle of less eligibility deserves attention because it reveals the disciplinary logic underlying work-conditioned benefits. The workhouse was not designed merely to provide shelter and sustenance; it was designed to be unpleasant enough that people would endure almost anything to avoid it. The architecture of early workhouses deliberately emphasized surveillance and control. Families were separated. Meals were meager. Work was often pointless, intended more to occupy time than to produce anything useful. The message was clear: accepting public assistance

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meant accepting degradation. This was presented not as cruelty but as kindness, a way of preventing the corruption of character that dependency supposedly produced.

The Poor Law Amendment of 1834 in England strengthened these principles, attempting to eliminate outdoor relief (assistance provided without requiring residence in an institution) entirely and making the workhouse the exclusive form of assistance for the able-bodied. While the law was never fully implemented as intended, it established the principle that assistance should be conditional, that conditions should be demanding enough to deter all but the most desperate, and that the line between deserving and undeserving poor should be policed through administrative rigor rather than charitable discretion.

These frameworks crossed the Atlantic with English colonists. Colonial American poor laws replicated the English system's essential features: local administration through towns or parishes, the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, settlement requirements that restricted assistance to established residents, and "warning out" practices that expelled nonresident paupers. The assumption that poverty among the able-bodied reflected character deficiency remained central to American approaches to poor relief throughout the colonial period.

What colonial Americans inherited was not simply a set of administrative practices but a way of thinking about poverty, work, and moral worth. The Poor Law tradition established that assistance to the able-bodied was properly conditional, that work represented moral value as well as economic contribution, and that local communities had both the right and the duty to distinguish those who deserved help from those who did not.

Nineteenth Century Moral Reform

The decades following the Civil War saw the elaboration of these colonial frameworks into what historians call "**scientific charity**," a movement that would profoundly influence American welfare policy into the twentieth century and beyond. The charity organization movement that spread across American cities in the 1870s and 1880s brought systematization and professionalization to the moral judgments embedded in Poor Law tradition.

The first American charity organization society was established in Buffalo in 1877, modeled on organizations already operating in England. By the 1890s, more than one hundred American cities had such organizations. Their philosophy was articulated clearly: urban poverty stemmed primarily from **moral deficiencies in the poor themselves**, poverty could be eliminated through correction of these individual deficiencies, and charitable organizations needed to coordinate their efforts to avoid encouraging dependency through indiscriminate giving.

Josephine Shaw Lowell, a national leader of the movement, believed that charity organization societies were responsible for "moral oversight" of people in poverty. The movement deployed "friendly visitors," typically middle-class women who would enter the homes of the poor to investigate their circumstances, verify their worthiness for assistance, and provide moral instruction. These visitors assessed not merely material need but character, sobriety, cleanliness, and conformity to bourgeois values of thrift and industry.

The New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, founded in 1843, exemplified this approach. Its founders explicitly positioned the organization as a response to the "false and dangerous methods" of charity that promoted "mendacity, vagrancy, and able-bodied pauperism." The association's central aim was not to "alleviate wretchedness but to reform character." Material assistance might follow moral reformation, but never precede it.



Scientific charity built on Americans' deep commitment to self-reliance, limited government, and economic freedom. Proponents shared the Poor Law tradition's goals of reducing the rolls of those receiving assistance and eliminating able-bodied recipients, combined with moral reformers' conviction that poverty required behavioral correction through discipline and education. The movement fit comfortably with post-Civil War social Darwinism, which held that humans were in competition and that the strong would thrive while the weak would not. Wealth signaled natural superiority; its absence suggested unfitness.

The charity organization movement left a lasting institutional legacy. The systematic investigation of applicants, the centralized registration of relief recipients to prevent "duplication," the emphasis on trained workers rather than spontaneous almsgiving, and the distinction between professional charity and mere sentiment all contributed to the development of professional social work in the early twentieth century. But the movement also bequeathed something less examined: the assumption that assistance to the poor properly involves surveillance, behavioral conditions, and moral judgment. The parallels to contemporary work requirement verification systems are not coincidental; they are genealogical.

Race, Reconstruction, and the Racialization of Dependency

The history of work-conditioned benefits in America cannot be understood apart from the history of race. The decades following the Civil War saw work requirements emerge as mechanisms of racial control, and the racialized politics of that era continue to shape welfare policy distinctions that persist today. The formal end of slavery did not end the assumption that Black labor belonged to white employers; it merely required new institutional mechanisms to enforce that assumption.

The Freedmen's Bureau, established in 1865 to assist formerly enslaved people in their transition to freedom, became the site of tension between providing genuine assistance and compelling labor. Bureau agents were charged with supervising labor contracts between freedpeople and planters, and while some agents genuinely protected freedpeople from exploitation, others used their position to procure cheap labor for Southern plantations. The Bureau's contradictory mandate revealed how deeply work requirements could be intertwined with racial subordination even when administered by a federal agency ostensibly committed to Black welfare.

The Bureau encouraged year-long labor contracts that effectively bound freedpeople to plantations, limiting their ability to move or negotiate better terms. These contracts frequently included behavior restrictions that echoed slavery's surveillance: freedpeople could not leave the plantation without permission, could not receive visitors, and could be dismissed for "bad behavior" at the planter's sole discretion. Bureau agents complained that freedwomen were "refusing to contract their labor" when Black families withdrew women from field work, a decision that represented Black families' assertion of autonomy but that Bureau officials treated as a problem requiring correction. The Bureau attempted to force freedwomen to work by insisting that their husbands sign contracts making the whole family available as field labor, and by declaring that unemployed freedwomen should be treated as vagrants.

Southern states passed Black Codes in 1865 and 1866 that explicitly used work requirements as instruments of racial subjugation. These laws **criminalized "vagrancy,"** a term capacious enough to encompass nearly any Black person not visibly employed by a white employer. Those convicted of vagrancy could be leased as convict laborers to railroads, mines, and plantations, a system that

functioned as slavery by another name. Not having a job was itself criminalized for Black Americans; the requirement to work was not an invitation to economic participation but a mechanism of control.

Mississippi's 1865 Black Code required all freedpeople to have written evidence of employment for the coming year each January. Those found unemployed could be arrested as vagrants, fined, and if unable to pay the fine, bound out to any white person willing to pay it. South Carolina's code required Black workers to labor from sunrise to sunset, to be "quiet and orderly," and to remain on the employer's premises unless granted permission to leave. The explicit purpose was to recreate the conditions of bound labor through nominally legal mechanisms. Federal intervention under Congressional Reconstruction temporarily suppressed the most explicit Black Codes, but their logic persisted through vagrancy laws and convict leasing systems that continued to compel Black labor through the early twentieth century.

The separate development of aid to mothers illustrates how work expectations and exemptions became racialized categories. Mothers' pensions, which emerged during the Progressive Era in the 1910s and 1920s, provided cash assistance to widowed mothers so they could care for their children at home rather than sending them to institutions or entering the labor force themselves. ***The program reflected maternalist assumptions that motherhood was valuable work deserving of public support.***

But mothers' pensions were not distributed equally. The programs operated at state and local levels with considerable administrative discretion, and that discretion was exercised to ***exclude Black mothers and other women of color from benefits.*** White widows were the primary beneficiaries; Black mothers, immigrant mothers, and mothers whose poverty resulted from circumstances other than widowhood were routinely deemed "unworthy." The same maternalist rhetoric that celebrated white motherhood as deserving of public support expected Black women to work in domestic service and agricultural labor.

When the Social Security Act of 1935 created Aid to Dependent Children (later Aid to Families with Dependent Children), it preserved this racialized structure by leaving eligibility determinations and benefit levels to state discretion. Southern states used this discretion to maintain racial hierarchies. "Suitable home" provisions allowed caseworkers to deny benefits to families deemed morally inadequate, a standard applied disproportionately to Black families. Seasonal employment policies suspended benefits during harvest seasons when Black agricultural labor was needed.

The distinctions between deserving and undeserving poor, between those who should be supported and those who should be compelled to work, were never racially neutral.

This history matters for understanding contemporary work requirements because the categories themselves carry embedded assumptions. When policy distinguishes between those exempt from work requirements and those subject to them, when it defines "qualifying activities" and "acceptable documentation," when it establishes who deserves accommodation and who must demonstrate compliance, it operates within frameworks shaped by four centuries of racialized moral judgment. The specific rules may be facially neutral, but they inherit a tradition in which the very concept of behavioral conditionality has served as an instrument of racial control.

Welfare Reform's Echoes

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 represented the most recent comprehensive restructuring of work-conditioned benefits before the One Big Beautiful Bill

Act. The rhetoric surrounding welfare reform and the justifications offered for its work requirements are strikingly similar to arguments made today for Medicaid work requirements, and the research on welfare reform's outcomes provides the closest available evidence for what Medicaid work requirements might accomplish.

President Clinton's promise to "end welfare as we know it" was accompanied by a philosophical repositioning that drew explicitly on the conservative framework of dignity through contribution. Work was presented not as a punitive condition but as a path to self-sufficiency and social participation. Time limits would prevent the development of "dependency culture." Behavioral requirements would transform a "hammock" into a "trampoline."

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program that replaced AFDC incorporated work requirements as a central feature. States were required to achieve work participation rates, and individual recipients generally had to participate in countable activities for specified hours each week. The results, measured by caseload decline, were dramatic: the number of families receiving cash assistance dropped by roughly sixty percent between 1994 and 2005, falling to levels not seen since the 1960s.

Whether this caseload decline represents policy success depends entirely on normative assumptions. Through a conservative lens, the decline demonstrated that millions had been receiving benefits they did not need or were not entitled to under a reciprocal framework. Through a progressive lens, the decline revealed that administrative barriers, sanctioning policies, and time limits pushed vulnerable people off assistance regardless of their actual circumstances. Research has consistently found that ***the majority of the caseload decline resulted from eligible families not receiving benefits rather than from families becoming ineligible through improved economic circumstances.***

The Government Accountability Office estimated that eighty-three percent of the TANF caseload decline between 1995 and 2005 was due to non-participation by families who remained eligible for benefits. Some of this non-participation reflected preference for avoiding a stigmatized program. But much of it reflected the increased administrative burden of compliance, the deterrent effect of work requirements for those with unstable employment or significant barriers, and the consequences of sanctioning policies that terminated benefits for procedural violations. States with more stringent sanctions saw larger caseload declines, but those declines did not correlate with better employment outcomes for former recipients.

The economic picture was more nuanced than simple caseload counts suggested. Employment among single mothers did increase substantially in the years immediately following reform, from about sixty percent in the mid-1990s to nearly seventy-five percent by 2000. But this increase coincided with the strongest economic expansion in a generation and with significant expansions in work supports like the Earned Income Tax Credit and childcare subsidies. Researchers have debated extensively what portion of employment gains can be attributed to work requirements themselves versus these other factors. Moreover, the employment trend stalled after 2000, and many mothers who left welfare for work remained in poverty, earning wages insufficient to support their families.

The experience of those who left TANF was often precarious. Studies found that many former recipients cycled between low-wage employment and unemployment, that few achieved economic self-sufficiency, and that material hardship remained common even among those who were

working. The policy had succeeded in reducing caseloads but had not clearly succeeded in its stated goal of moving families from dependency to stable employment. When the recession of 2008 arrived, TANF's block grant structure left it unable to respond to increased need; the caseload barely increased even as poverty rates rose sharply, demonstrating that the program had largely abandoned its function as a buffer against economic distress.

What research on welfare reform reveals most clearly is that work requirements produce procedural disenrollment at least as much as behavioral change. People leave the rolls not primarily because they have found stable employment making them ineligible, but because they cannot navigate the requirements, miss deadlines, fail to submit documentation, or are sanctioned for procedural violations. This finding has direct implications for Medicaid work requirements, where the same dynamics can be expected to produce coverage loss among those who are working or exempt but cannot document their status.

What History Teaches

Across four centuries, certain patterns recur with remarkable consistency. The first is **the persistence of the deserving/undeserving distinction** in every system of conditional assistance. Whether through Tudor poor laws, Victorian charity organization, or contemporary work requirements, societies that condition assistance on behavior must establish categories that separate those who merit support from those who do not. These categories always involve moral judgment, always require administrative discretion to implement, and always produce exclusion of people who arguably belong in the supported category.

The second recurring pattern is the use of **work as a moral test** rather than simply an economic condition. Work requirements in every era have been justified not merely by fiscal concerns but by claims about human dignity, the prevention of dependency, and the moral value of contribution. These are not cynical rationalizations; they reflect genuine beliefs about the relationship between work, self-worth, and social membership. But they also reveal how behavioral conditions serve functions beyond their stated purposes, establishing hierarchies of moral worth and reinforcing social norms about acceptable conduct.

The third pattern is the function of **administrative burden as implicit rationing**. From the workhouse test of the Elizabethan Poor Laws to the investigation protocols of scientific charity to the documentation requirements of TANF and now Medicaid, the procedures required to access conditional benefits have consistently served to reduce the rolls beyond what substantive eligibility criteria alone would accomplish. Administrative complexity is not a bug in these systems; it is a feature that accomplishes policy goals that cannot be stated explicitly.

The fourth pattern is the **persistence of racial politics** in shaping categorical distinctions. From Reconstruction-era vagrancy laws to the racialized administration of mothers' pensions to the welfare queen narrative that shaped 1996 reform to contemporary debates about work requirements, racial assumptions have consistently influenced which groups are seen as deserving accommodation and which are seen as requiring behavioral discipline. These assumptions need not be explicit or even conscious to shape policy design and implementation.

What might be different this time? **The scale is certainly different:** 18.5 million adults subject to work requirements through a single policy change represents a scope unprecedented in American welfare history. The technology is different: automated verification systems, digital submission portals, and data matching capabilities create possibilities for seamless compliance that did not

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exist in earlier eras. The political context is different: work requirements now enjoy bipartisan support that transcends the partisan divisions of earlier debates.

But the fundamental tensions are the same tensions that have characterized work-conditioned benefits since the sixteenth century. How do we balance expectations of contribution with accommodation for those who genuinely cannot contribute? How do we implement moral categories through administrative systems without producing arbitrary exclusion? How do we distinguish between those deterred from claiming benefits they don't need and those excluded from benefits they do? How do we prevent work requirements from becoming mechanisms that reproduce existing inequalities?

History suggests these questions cannot be fully resolved. They can only be negotiated, imperfectly and repeatedly, through policy design choices that reflect particular balances between competing values. The long arc of work-conditioned benefits does not determine what contemporary policy should be. But it does clarify that we are not writing on a blank slate. Every choice about verification systems, exemption categories, and navigation support occurs within frameworks inherited from centuries of prior negotiation. Understanding that inheritance is essential to making those choices wisely.

Those who do not know history may still repeat it. But those who do know history can at least recognize what they are repeating, and make more informed decisions about whether the patterns of the past represent wisdom worth preserving or errors worth correcting.

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