

Unseating the welfare queen?

COVID-19 and the possibility for reform in American state institution

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There is a clear historical relationship between the welfare, child welfare and criminal justice systems in the US. We have found that nowhere is the interaction of these three state institutions more clearly on display than in the myth of the welfare queen, a stigmatising label that rose to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s. It refers to women - often black - who are too lazy to work and instead commit welfare fraud in order to live off public assistance. They are also neglectful single mothers who engage in other illegal activities and hence are involved with the criminal justice system. This provocative image has been used to justify the punitive nature of welfare and state institutions more generally.

Still, the Covid-19 pandemic is a chance to rethink the state's relationship to these marginalised groups. The US government's response has shown that although these systems still remain linked, the state can and has worked to address poverty and marginalisation. The CARES ACT signalled a more supportive approach, with moves toward decarceration, additional funding for child welfare, and support for low-income families. Related discussions on a childcare allowance also show the recognition of the structural barriers to work and care that women face, possibly highlighting a move away from the individual focus on the failings of the welfare queen. Though it remains to be seen if these moves amount to long-lasting changes, they offer glimpse into a future in which state institutions support these marginalised groups, rather than discipline them.