



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 34
Issue 1 *March*

Article 17

2007

Backlash Against Welfare Mothers Past and Present. Ellen Reese

Allison De Marco
University of California, Berkeley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Marco, Allison De (2007) "*Backlash Against Welfare Mothers Past and Present.* Ellen Reese," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol34/iss1/17>

This Book Note is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Section II consists of two chapters that focus on the effects of welfare reform on children. Both chapters provide a synthesis of evidence from quantitative and qualitative perspectives, nicely illustrating the added dimension that the qualitative data provide. This section captures the range of factors, in addition to parental employment, that impact child well-being, concluding with policy recommendations, such as removing the family cap on TANF payments, which may foster child well-being.

The last section of the book addresses the role that fathers play in these families. In their introduction, Duerr Berrick and Fuller point out that while welfare reform contains important provisions related to fathers and their financial obligations, not enough is known about “fathers’ experiences and capacities vis-à-vis their affective relationships with their children and their former partners” (p. 10). Pate’s chapter in this section provides a counterpart to the “deadbeat dad” image of these fathers, giving voice to several men who are trying to meet their responsibilities as fathers, while under significant financial duress themselves.

Overall, this is a solid collection of articles that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of poverty, the effects of welfare reform, and the lived experience of families transitioning from welfare to employment. Each article provides a useful lens through which to understand these issues, and as a whole, reinforces the simple, yet extremely important fact that policies related to welfare reform affect *families*, not just the mothers making the transition into work activities.

Mellissa Martin-Mollard, University of California, Berkeley

Ellen Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers Past and Present*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005. \$ 19.95 papercover.

Since the passage of welfare reform in 1996 there has been extensive research on its implementation and the impact of its provisions on children and families. In addition to the wealth of articles produced for academic journals, a number of recent

books also deal with the subject of welfare reform chronicling families' experiences negotiating the welfare system. Although most of these books present stories of families dealing with the fallout from welfare reform, Ellen Reese's book, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers Past and Present*, provides a historical analysis of the attacks on the women who receive benefits from the system from the late 1940s to the present.

Reese, a professor of Sociology at the University of California, Riverside, traces the history of political attacks against poor mothers' access to public assistance to assess how and why regional welfare attacks in the early days of the welfare state led to the strong, national assault on welfare we are experiencing today. Part I focuses on the causes and consequences of welfare opposition, looking at the impact of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 that imposed strict limits on welfare use. The initial chapters trace the early history of mothers' aid and explore how class, race, and gender politics have historically interacted to provoke powerful cross-class support for welfare cutbacks. Part II deals with the first welfare backlash between 1945 and 1979 following the expansion of welfare after World War II when employment declined and caseloads swelled. Public assistance became more inclusive of unwed and minority mothers leading to increased controversy. This section also discusses the role of large farmers whose interest in maintaining a pool of cheap labor impacted the development of welfare policy. Part III focuses on the contemporary welfare backlash from 1980 to 2004. Reese examines the rise of the Republican Right, business interests, conservative think tanks, and their role in the attacks on welfare culminating in the current reform of welfare policies. In her final chapter, Reese presents an agenda for rebuilding a welfare state that advocates a "New Deal for Working Families" to include improved access to jobs, training, and education, help for workers to make ends meet, and help for workers in balancing the dual obligations of work and family.

Reese's book serves an important function by analytically and comprehensively exploring the assaults against welfare over the past 60 years. A major strength of the book is the exhaustive research undertaken by the author. This will be

helpful to those who desire more than a cursory knowledge of social welfare history in the United States. This book will be valuable for anyone interested in this area, but particularly for social work graduate students, researchers, and instructors. The level of detail presented may overwhelm undergraduates. One drawback of the book is that its proposals for policy reforms in the final chapter are too brief and could be more fully fleshed out. Overall, readers of this volume will come away with a deeper understanding of US welfare policy and the history of attacks against public assistance programs that seek to support needy families.

Allison De Marco, University of California, Berkeley

Thema Bryant-Davis. *Thriving in the Wake of Trauma: A Multicultural Guide*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. \$39.95 hardcover.

Interpersonal trauma is experienced by survivors within the context of their culture, and healing is likewise shaped by culture. Unfortunately, this is not yet routinely recognized by the helping profession and it is assumed that the experience of trauma is universal. Exploring the cultural meanings of trauma opens opportunities for stronger recovery by both individual survivors and the people in their lives. Considering the increasingly diverse demographic of the U.S. and the growing acceptance of cultural competence as essential to social work practice, literature that integrates multiculturalism and trauma is greatly needed.

Bryant-Davis's book is a blend of scholarly review, self-help guide, case study and creative writing. She includes not just traditions and identity based on ethnicity and race, but disability, gender, migration status, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status as well. Interpersonal trauma is defined as any violation against a person or group of people that leads to feelings of powerlessness and emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual wounds. An important contribution of Bryant-Davis is her emphasis on *thriving* after trauma, in contrast with recovery from trauma. To thrive, survivors