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Majority Rules/Minority Rights
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3/22/10

Issue Brief: African Americans and Social Welfare

Key Words (4-6)

African Americans, welfare, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), race, stereotypes, poverty

Description (2 sentences)

This issue brief focuses on social welfare and how it relates to African Americans in the United States. More specifically it discusses the racial aspect of social welfare how African Americans are perceived in regards to it.

Key Points (4-6)

- History of welfare has led to the image or myth that the typical welfare recipient is African American.
- African Americans never constituted more than half of the recipients. As of 2003 they constituted 38%, while whites comprise 31%
- Study on how Americans view each other- shows that peoples stereotypical attitudes towards African Americans effects how they view social welfare
- TANF enacted in 1997 provides temporary financial assistance while aiming to get people off of that assistance, mainly through employment.
- African American unemployment reached an all time low of 6.5% in 2000
- Yet, African American's success rate in their transition from welfare to work is significantly different than white Americans.

Images (2-4)

Martin Gilens. 1999. Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

www.publicagenda.org/charts/race-tanf-recipients

Brief (500-700 words)

In the United States, the African American population comprises 38% of all Americans on welfare while whites comprise approximately 31% of welfare recipients.# Although both races make up a majority of the recipients of social welfare, there is a fundamental negative image and stereotypical attitude in society that African Americans are the sole recipients. Much of this stems from the history of social welfare and how it has developed since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's.

As society has progressed from racial segregation to equality and freedom for all American's, racial issues seem to occur less over equal rights than the launching of

programs set up to compensate for past wrongs. Although racist beliefs may be the core of some people's opposition to welfare programs there are others that base their animosity on stereotypes about work ethic, discipline and self-reliance. In a recent national survey, more than half of the total participants rated African Americans as lazier than whites and again more than half of the survey participants said that African Americans are more inclined than whites to prefer welfare over work.# This negative perception of African Americans, mostly among white Americans, regarding welfare is due to underlying stereotypes of minorities being poor and taking advantage of government assistance programs that are not deserved. Some of this can be seen in the media's emphasis of poor and impoverished individuals being African American. This was evident in the media's promotion of the idea of a "Welfare Queen" in the 70's and 80's. This was the idea of an African American woman living lavishly on of the federal assistance money that was a powerful radicalized controlling image perpetuated by President Reagan.# This contributed to a sentiment of primarily white American's hostility towards welfare during that period.

The enactment of TANF or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families in 1997 had a disparate racial impact in that a greater percentage of white Americans no longer needed welfare than African Americans. However, a variable like employment discrimination is still somewhat of a factor for African Americans making it harder for them to find jobs after leaving welfare programs. Other factors that may impede African Americans from making a successful transition from welfare to the workforce are their historically higher unemployment rates than white Americans and longer periods of unemployment and absence from the labor force. Nonetheless, some positives still have arisen for African Americans. The percentage of employed single mothers (African American women make up a large percent of single mothers) rose from 59 percent to 73 percent from the late 1990's to early 2000's. Also, African American unemployment reached an all time low of 6.5 percent in 2000.# The poverty rate among single mothers and African American children has also reached an all time low with the government's assistance. Yet, overshadowing these positives, more than one million former welfare recipients have neither a job nor any cash assistance on a given day.# Some may hold unsteady jobs throughout a year, but their incomes are still very low. The condition of poor families on welfare is largely connected with the broader issues of poverty among African Americans and it is necessary to address problems confronting these families. Many feel that the institutional system designed to provide assistance to poor families has often created larger problems for the poor families than actually helping them. The assistance programs have not been completely successful in providing the resources necessary for families to move from welfare to ample earnings on their own.

Due to racial stereotypes and the statistical discrepancies between different races regarding welfare, this social issue has garnered a negative outlook toward African Americans. Although programs like TANF are approaching poverty from a color-blind perspective, their implementations had and still today have certain racial consequences. In this respect, it is necessary to realize the role of racial politics in these governmental programs and how the content and structure of these policies can affect the success and support that they get and also affect the racial perception of welfare recipients.

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