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**Civics 101**

**Episode 93: WELFARE TRANSCRIPT**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101 the podcasts refresher on the basics of how our democracy works. Welfare is one of the nation's most contentious and least understood social programs. What began as support for single mothers and their children has throughout history been a target for stigmatization and budget cuts. Today we're going to get some background on welfare and here's some data on the program's relationship to poverty. Premilla Nadasen is Professor of History at Barnard College and author of welfare in the United States, and here to help. Premilla, welcome to Civics 101.

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:00:33] Thank you very much.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:34] We're starting with the basics although there's a lot to it. What is welfare?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:00:39] That's a really great question. I think at the core we have to think about welfare as a way for us to provide economic security to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable citizens in the United States.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:53] When did it begin as we know it?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:00:56] Welfare actually has a very long history. For much of U.S. history the care for the poor for the unemployed for those who are unable to take care of themselves was a local concern so local districts often with the help of charities would take care of the poor would provide housing or food. In the 1920s we see the emergence of something called Mothers pensions programs. These were state level programs that provided assistance primarily to single mothers and their children. The welfare system as we understand it today began in the 1930s in the midst of the Great Depression when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president. He passed a piece of legislation called the Social Security Act in 1935 and that created the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:48] So Social Security and welfare often get lumped together. Do they belong together?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:01:54] They're actually very different kinds of programs so Social Security as we speak about it today is really a program for the elderly. It's a program that people pay into although it is not fully funded through personal contributions. And once people retire they do receive a Social Security payment from the federal government. AFDC or Aid to Families with Dependent Children is a program that is what we called means tested and categorical. That is you have to fall below a certain poverty threshold in order to qualify for AFDC. And you have to be a single parent with children with a child or with children. AFDC no longer exists as we understand it is no longer called that, it's called TANF, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:43] What was the primary goal of welfare when it started?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:02:47] The primary goal of welfare was to provide financial support for poor single mothers who did not have a male head of household who was working and who could support them. It provided a monthly stipend initially just for the children. And a few years later in the 1940s it expanded to also provide a stipend for mothers. The vast majority of recipients in the very earliest years were white women white single mothers. Women of color were either excluded completely from AFDC or if they did receive it as was the case with some African-American women in the south they were kicked off of the welfare rolls during cotton picking season. And so welfare was actually rooted in the idea of women's roles as mothers that women did in fact work. They had a primary responsibility to take care of children. This was racialized because white women had historically been seen as mothers whereas women of color especially African-American women had historically worked welfare when it started actually offered a very meager stipend. So many women who were on the welfare rolls didn't get enough to support their family so they would often do side work as a way to supplement their income. Despite some of the weaknesses with the early welfare program I think it was a very very important program because it did provide something of a safety net especially for poor single mothers but it also was I think recognition of the social value of mothering.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:26] That seems consistent with American values that very pro-family idea. You said it was racialized when and why did welfare become controversial?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:04:37] Welfare started to become controversial around 1960 or so the term welfare queen was coined in the 1970s and this was the stereotype of a black single mother who people believed was lazy who had multiple children by multiple fathers who was a drain on the public coffers. And this was a term that was popularized by Ronald Reagan in the 70s. And it really embodies the idea of the undeserving black single mother. That image though of the welfare queen is something that was rooted in an earlier period of the 1960s and beginning in the 1960s when we first begin to see public opposition to welfare. Prior to that welfare was not a controversial program but in the 1960s we begin to see states launching fraud investigations to examine and ferret out people who were cheating the welfare system. We begin to see more discussions about race in terms of welfare so welfare becomes tied to the politics of race. There's a particular concern about African-American and Puerto Rican women who are deemed undeserving of assistance.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:54] Ronald Reagan among others that was one of those who pointed out fraud that there were women bilking the government of hundreds of thousands of dollars. So any truth to those kind of allegations and what kind of percentage of fraud happens in the welfare system compared to other government programs?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:06:10] There's always a degree of fraud. There's a degree of fraud in every single program public or private. And so I would never say there was no fraud but studies show that rates of fraud in the welfare system are minuscule. In fact the vast majority of people who are on welfare don't really want to be on welfare. If they had an option to be able to support their children in some other fashion or if they could get jobs in fact that's what they would choose to do. So there have been numerous investigations about welfare fraud and even in the 1960s there was very little evidence that there ever was fraud.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:47] I want to pick up on that idea of states debating welfare and welfare payments. Now this is a federal program. States control the spending. What are some of the ways that they wanted to curb enrollment?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:07:00] Well once women of color started applying for and receiving welfare assistance there was a concerted effort on the part of state to try to limit the number of women who were on welfare. So we see in the 1960s that welfare is becoming more and more punitive it's moving away from the intended mission of supporting single mothers towards one of sanctioning them and getting off of welfare. And states used a number of different strategies to do this. They use something called a suitable home rule that they passed locally where the caseworker would go into a recipient's home and try to determine if in fact the recipient had improper standards of housekeeping perhaps the house was dirty or perhaps the children didn't look like they had been fed or for one reason or another. This would be grounds not to improve home life but actually to simply cut the recipient off of welfare assistance. Another rule that was used was the man in the House rule so caseworkers would show up sometimes in the middle of the night. And these were referred to as midnight raids and they would try to determine if there was any evidence of male presence in the household they would look for a pair of men's shoes under the bed or a razor in the bathroom and if they found this it was evidence for the case worker that the woman had a relationship with a man. And the assumption was that this man would be able to support the family. And then another way that states would try to remove families from the welfare rolls was through the implementation of work requirements. So we begin to see in the 1960s for the first time states requiring that recipients either take job training or actually be employed. And I think this is really significant because this suggests the ways in which states began to think about removing people and I think began to undercut this idea about the importance of motherhood and women staying home to raise children.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:16] Let me just make sure I understand you said that aid to families with dependent children ended. That was the 1996 reform?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:09:24] That's right. So in 1996 Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed a piece of legislation that was known as a Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and that transformed AFDC or what we call welfare today into block grants for states. It was renamed Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. And what this did is it took the block of money the states were getting for welfare and it allowed states to do a lot of what they wanted with it so states could really well their own welfare program. There were no longer federal mandates about how many recipients ought to be covered. About who was eligible. In fact federal mandates now actually limited welfare assistance. So along with this change states said that recipients could no longer remain on welfare for more than 5 years or so there was a lifetime limit of five years on welfare receipt. They now required that states put recipients to work. So recipients now have to work 30 hours a week. The legislation also attempted to promote marriage. So I think it's interesting to think about the shift because it suggests that the government now laid the ultimate responsibility for poverty with the families themselves. Poverty as at its core as was understood in the 1996 legislation was an individual problem and that if in fact people married if in fact they had job training the assumption was that they would be fine.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:05] How many families receive that Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF today?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:11:12] Today there are about 4 million recipients on TANF, about one point five million families and that number has declined dramatically since welfare reform there were about thirteen point five million families who were receiving welfare assistance in 1996. So there are far fewer families who are on welfare assistance today.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:39] Are there far fewer families who are living in poverty today as well?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:11:43] No. In fact today only about 10 percent of families who are poor are receiving welfare assistance. There are about 41 million Americans who are living in poverty today it's about 13 percent of the population and 18 percent of children today are poor. And I think an even more alarming figure is the number of families who are living in what's called extreme poverty in the United States today. And this is a figure that suggests that families who are living on less than two dollars per person per day which means that they essentially have no income. The number of individuals in extreme poverty has doubled since 1996. Today in the United States we have one point five million people living in extreme poverty.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:38] The House and Senate passed a joint budget resolution this fall with significant cuts to welfare programs and there were arguments on the floor for rolling back or even eliminating social safety net programs. So what Premilla do you think is the future of welfare?

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:12:54] If we look at the current tax bill in the current budget it does not look very promising. I think there are some misconceptions however about the cost of welfare as it relates to the federal budget. More broadly today TANF is about point five percent of the total federal budget. And we can compare that to Social Security the program for the elderly which is 24 percent of the federal budget. So TANF the program we have for poor single parents and their children is actually a very very small amount of what our federal government spends. I do think that in this moment when we see more and more families who are living in poverty who are unable to care for themselves when there are fewer options for child care when it's very very difficult to try to support a family on minimum wage. In fact the minimum wage right now the federal minimum wage is seven dollars and 25 cents. If you work 40 hours a week 52 weeks of a year you will earn fifteen thousand dollars a year. The poverty threshold for three people in this country is twenty thousand dollars. So even if you work full time at a minimum wage job job you are not earning enough to support your family. So I think we have to think about ways in which we can provide some kind of supports to the poor and I think we're moving in the wrong direction.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:14:25] Premilla, thank you very much for joining us.

**Premilla Nadasen:** [00:14:27] Thank you Virginia.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:14:28] Premilla Nadasen is a professor of history at Barnard College and author of Welfare in the United States.