

## ABSTRACT

### INTIMATE NARRATIVES, STATE ANXIETIES, AND THE ENFORCEMENT OF CHILD SUPPORT IN THE UNITED STATES

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Scholars of the U.S. welfare state have given thorough attention to the figure of poor women, especially poor women of color, in the transformation of social policy in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The focus on “welfare queen” tropes in anti-welfare discourse obscures the central role that fatherhood played in crafting social policy to replace the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, however. This paper looks closely at the development of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), created in 1975, to historicize the U.S. government’s interest in promoting “responsible fatherhood.”

To conduct this analysis, I turn to the legislative history surrounding U.S. Public Law 93-647, which created the OSCE. I conduct a close reading of three Congressional reports accompanying the proposed law to determine the purpose and goals of the new federal agency. Rather than a value-neutral effort to extract payment from absent fathers, the law was framed through moralized references to fatherlessness in poor and minority communities. These reports utilized narratives of fatherlessness in strategic ways to personalize the problem of “welfare dependency.” By deploying particular anecdotes, politicians justified more stringent enforcement of child support and a reduction of state programs to address poverty. Familial intimacy was leveraged in the service of shifting state priorities, as the government devoted resources away from payments to poor families and toward new technologies for targeting individual men.

This paper adds nuance to contemporary literature on the demise of the welfare state. Many scholars describe the post-welfare era as a neoliberal decimation of government programs and a devolution of authority and responsibility downward (from the national to the subnational, the local, and ultimately the individual). The history of child support enforcement in America reveals that dewelfareization did more than just eliminate cash payments to poor people. It also authorized new forms of surveillance over poor families, especially poor families of color.

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