

Blame Welfare: Ignore Poverty and Inequality. By Joel F. Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007. Pp. xiii+401. \$80.00 cloth; \$29.99 paper.

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Despite its clumsy and potentially misleading title, Handler and Hasenfeld's *Blame Welfare: Ignore Poverty and Inequality* provides a useful synthesis of recent research on welfare, poverty, and the low-wage labor market in the United States in service of the authors' thesis, that the nation must reject the symbolic politics of "welfare reform" and ensure economic stability for working families. Handler and Hasenfeld, University of California, Los Angeles professors of law and social welfare, respectively, have made this point before, but it is worth reiterating, particularly now that the 1996 welfare reform and reduction in welfare rolls has driven poverty from mainstream political debate.

The authors' statistical portrait of poverty in the present-day United States, drawn from a range of longitudinal and case studies, is solid and useful as reference material for students and scholars. The studies debunk the persistent myth that poverty is the fault of a deviant "underclass": while nonwhite Americans experience disproportionate levels of poverty, the nation's high child poverty rate results, the authors insist, from an anachronistic and crumbling social safety net and a deteriorating low-wage labor market. Studies on the aftermath of welfare reform suggest as much: single mothers on Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF, which replaced the much-reviled Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1996) are members of the "working poor."

Handler and Hasenfeld are at their best when synthesizing the important new research on welfare leavers, who often "play by the rules" (that is, work for wages) but remain poor (p. 30). Leaver studies reveal the barriers that single mothers face in earning wages (from health problems to child care needs) and the instability, low wages, and lack of mobility that characterize the low-wage labor market. If the most important issue is children's well-being, the authors insist, then welfare reform is not the success it is purported to be.

In the book's historical sections, the authors are on less-solid ground. Drawing on secondary sources, they assert that from the colonial era to the present, "moral blame, race and gender discrimination, and symbolic politics" have cast poor single mothers as "undeserving" (p. 155) and that commitment to the "work ethic" and inattention to structural barriers have hampered responses to poverty. Such a broad sweep (one that moves from the War on Poverty to TANF in a few paragraphs) and the emphasis on

continuity obscure important changes. The authors have little to say about politics: American policy makers, it seems, are all of one cloth, which also leaves open questions of causality. If Americans have consistently demonized poor single mothers and exploited the symbolic politics of welfare, then change over time (such as the shift from an activist government that almost passed a guaranteed income in the early 1970s to the end of the welfare “entitlement” in 1996) becomes inexplicable. There are virtually no actors in *Blame Welfare*, only an all-encompassing ideology of racism and moral condemnation. One would hardly know that welfare has always been hotly debated and that the portrait of welfare mothers as parasites leaching off the public purse is a political construction that can be tied to specific politicians (e.g., Russell Long—though the authors mistakenly call him by his father’s name, Huey), scholars (e.g., Charles Murray, et al.), and organizations (e.g., the American Enterprise Institute, the Manhattan Institute, and so on).

An original contribution is the authors’ attention to welfare “at the field level,” where “discretion and power is exercised over the lives” of the poor, a “much neglected issue” in welfare studies (pp. 185, 10). It is here that the inherent contradictions of American welfare policy—its commitment to helping poor children without diminishing parental work ethic, its obsession with eligibility to the detriment of social service delivery—play out. Despite the ceremonial transformation of welfare offices into employment agencies, the exigencies of administration have simply created a harsher system, in which sanctions and “work-first” programs keep families off the rolls.

The authors’ argument leads to their policy recommendations. They offer a potentially effective, though hardly revolutionary, program: universal children’s allowance, improvements in the low-wage labor market (guaranteed jobs, a higher minimum wage, expanded Earned Income Tax Credit), parental leave and child care facilities, and community-based social services. But the authors offer no road map for achieving their program, and they overlook the most vital force for economic justice in contemporary America: the unionization of low-wage service workers—a predominantly nonwhite, female, and immigrant labor movement that offers poor single mothers and other low-wage workers both empowerment and a strategy for political change. If the demise of “welfare as we knew it” has transformed poor single mothers once and for all into members of the working class, then the labor movement may offer the most promising tool for rebuilding the nation’s safety net.