

# Researcher links government assistance program to much earlier origins of welfare stereotypes

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Racial stereotypes prompted by the Reconstruction-era Freedmen's Bureau following the Civil War endure in America's present-day social

safety net, according to new research co-authored by a University of Massachusetts Amherst public policy researcher. The full paper, "Institutional Legacies and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Spending Decisions: The Case of the Freedmen's Bureau," appears in the *Journal of Public Policy*.

Kelsey Shoub, assistant professor of public policy, is part of a team that has established a link between the prevalence of Freedmen's Bureau field offices—created to assist freed slaves in the South in the aftermath of the Civil War—and more coercive policies imposed by some states today under the federal government's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

States that historically had more field offices during Reconstruction are more likely, on average, to spend TANF funds on programs aiming to correct perceived societal deficiencies, such as having children out-of-wedlock, single-parent households and non-participation in the [labor force](#), as opposed to direct cash assistance to recipients.

Though the Freedmen's Bureau provided important relief services to formerly enslaved people and displaced [white people](#) alike, it was inaccurately perceived by many to serve freed Black people at the expense of white communities. This served as the foundation for future welfare programs and false narratives that still exist more than 150 years later.

"Racialization and 'otherizing' of policies—specifically the white fear that Black people are taking advantage of the system— isn't a new thing," Shoub says. "It started with the first wave of social welfare in the U.S. with the Freedmen's Bureau and persists today with tropes of the mythical 'welfare queen.'"

TANF, part of a welfare overhaul passed by Congress and signed by

President Bill Clinton in 1996, gives states wide latitude to spend a fixed, \$16.5 billion federal block grant largely as they choose, provided it fits into 20 broad categories.

The stated goals of the legislation are to "provide assistance to needy families so that children may remain in their homes; end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits through work, job preparation and marriage; reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and promote the formation and maintenance of two-parent families."

The research highlights disparities in state-level TANF administrative choices and how states with a stronger legacy of Freedmen's Bureau relief often wield government assistance today as a mechanism for social control of the poor. However, the authors do not find a relationship between the prevalence of Freedmen's Bureau field offices and spending on basic assistance programs.

"Without looking back at the origins of the institutions we're trying to reform, we'll replicate what we already have to some degree," Shoub adds.

Shoub collaborated on the research with lead author Morgan Lowder and Anthony Hobert Jr., who are both doctoral candidates in the Department of Political Science at the University of South Carolina.

**More information:** Morgan A. Lowder et al, Institutional legacies and temporary assistance for needy families spending decisions: the case of the Freedmen's Bureau, *Journal of Public Policy* (2023). [DOI: 10.1017/S0143814X23000168](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X23000168)

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