

Radio Address to the Nation on Welfare Reform

Ronald Reagan, February 1986

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Today I'd like to speak to you about a gathering crisis in our society: It's a family crisis. To some it's hidden, concealed behind tenement walls or lost in the forgotten streets of our inner cities. But for millions of Americans, the crisis is ever present and growing, and it threatens to become a permanent scar on the American promise of hope and opportunity for all.

I'm talking about the crisis of family breakdowns, especially among the welfare poor, both black and white. In inner cities today, families, as we've always thought of them, are not even being formed. Since 1960 the percentage of babies born out of wedlock has more than doubled. And too often their mothers are only teenagers. They're children, many of them 15, 16, and 17 years old with all the responsibilities of grownups thrust upon them. The fathers of these children are often nowhere to be found. In some instances you have to go back three generations before you can find an intact family. It seems even the memory of families is in danger of becoming extinct. And what of the babies born out of wedlock, these children born to children? Statistically, we know that they're much more likely to have a low birth weight and, thus, serious health problems. We know that out-of-wedlock children often suffer abuse and neglect as well. And what sort of future can they look forward to?

The family is the most basic support system there is. For two centuries now, it's been families pulling together that has provided the courage, willpower, and sense of security that have enabled millions of Americans to escape poverty and grab hold of the rungs on the ladder of opportunity. How often have we heard about the immigrant father laboring long into the night to give his children the advantages he never had? How many self-made men and women in America of all ethnic backgrounds owe their success to the strength of character given them by hard-working, loving parents? But for the children of child-mothers and absentee fathers, there is often only a deepening cycle of futility, hopelessness, and despair.

We're in danger of creating a permanent culture of poverty as inescapable as any chain or bond; a second and separate America, an America of lost dreams and stunted lives. The irony is that misguided welfare programs instituted in the name of compassion have actually helped turn

a shrinking problem into a national tragedy. From the 1950s on, poverty in America was declining. American society, an opportunity society, was doing its wonders. Economic growth was providing a ladder for millions to climb up out of poverty and into prosperity. In 1964 the famous War on Poverty was declared and a funny thing happened. Poverty, as measured by dependency, stopped shrinking and then actually began to grow worse. I guess you could say, poverty won the war. Poverty won in part because instead of helping the poor, government programs ruptured the bonds holding poor families together.

Perhaps the most insidious effect of welfare is its usurpation of the role of provider. In States where payments are highest, for instance, public assistance for a single mother can amount to much more than the usable income of a minimum wage job. In other words, it can pay for her to quit work. Many families are eligible for substantially higher benefits when the father is not present. What must it do to a man to know that his own children will be better off if he is never legally recognized as their father? Under existing welfare rules, a teenage girl who becomes pregnant can make herself eligible for welfare benefits that will set her up in an apartment of her own, provide medical care, and feed and clothe her. She only has to fulfill one condition: not marry or identify the father.

Obviously something is desperately wrong with our welfare system. With only about half of what is now spent on welfare, we could give enough money to every impoverished man, woman, and child to lift them above the poverty line. Instead, we spend vast amounts on a system that perpetuates poverty. But the waste of money pales before the sinful waste of human potential – the squandering of so many millions of hopes and dreams.

In my [most recent] State of the Union Address, I directed our administration to study the welfare system with a keen eye to making reforms. We already have in place a low-income assistance working group, which is hard at its task. In addition, I've instructed Attorney General Edwin Meese, as Chairman *pro tem* of our Domestic Policy Council, to convene a working group to evaluate the effect of a wide range of government programs on American families, especially poor families. These groups will report back to me by December 1st. The welfare tragedy has gone on too long. It's time to reshape our welfare system so that it can be judged by how many Americans it makes independent of welfare.

Until next week, thanks for listening. God bless you.