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TANF and Black Fatherhood: A Critical Historical Policy Analysis of Family Responsibility

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Abstract

Objective

To examine how Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) policy defines family responsibility and shapes Black father involvement.

Background

TANF's emphasis on employment, marriage, and financial provision reflects historical regulation of Black families and may overlook fathers' relational contributions.

Methods

A qualitative critical historical policy analysis informed by Critical Race Theory, strengths-based perspective, and Africana-centered scholarship examined TANF's design and implementation alongside existing empirical evidence.

Results

The analysis identified tensions between family-stability objectives and restrictive eligibility, sanctions, administrative discretion, and child-support enforcement. Existing evidence documents racial disparities in access and administration, while policy definitions inadequately recognize multidimensional father involvement.

Conclusion

TANF can reinforce racialized constructions of responsibility and constrain conditions supporting Black father involvement.

Recommendations:

Reforms should strengthen benefit adequacy, equitable administration, child-support pass-through policies, realistic support orders, and culturally responsive services recognizing caregiving and co-parenting.

Introduction

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is the primary federal cash assistance program for low-income families with children in the United States. Established under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), TANF replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), an entitlement program that provided guaranteed cash assistance to eligible families since the Great Depression era (Falk, 2026a). Unlike AFDC, TANF operates through a fixed block grant that gives states greater control over program design and eliminates the federal guarantee of assistance (Falk, 2026a). TANF retained AFDC's focus on supporting children in their own homes and helping parents achieve self-sufficiency while adding goals of reducing dependence on government assistance, preventing out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and promoting two-parent families (Falk, 2026b).

TANF advances these goals through policies that regulate recipients' employment and access to assistance. Its primary mechanisms include work requirements, time limits, and sanctions, which allow states to reduce or terminate benefits when recipients fail to comply with program rules (Falk, 2026b). Federal law generally limits federally funded assistance to 60 months for families with an adult recipient, while states retain discretion over many eligibility requirements and enforcement practices. Some states also impose family caps, which restrict additional benefits for children born while a family receives assistance (Patel & Shrivastava, 2023). TANF further promotes marriage and responsible fatherhood through dedicated funding for research and grants, including $150 million allocated to these efforts in 2005 (Falk, 2026b). These policies contrast with aspects of AFDC, under which two-parent families faced additional eligibility restrictions and generally qualified only under specific parental employment conditions (Falk, 2026b). Despite differences in state implementation, TANF programs share the goals of providing financial assistance, promoting employment, and influencing family structure and behavior.

TANF's emphasis on work, personal responsibility, and family structure must be understood within the broader context of racial inequality and longstanding stereotypes about Black families. For Black mothers, work requirements can reinforce racialized assumptions that portray them as unwilling to work while directing them toward low-wage employment (Hayes & Latch, 2025). For Black fathers, child support enforcement can prioritize financial obligations over meaningful parental involvement, disproportionately burdening low-income, noncustodial Black fathers through consequences such as damaged credit, suspended driver's licenses, and incarceration (Pratt, 2026; Ross, 2022). State-level variation in TANF implementation also contributes to unequal access to assistance, with Black children being more likely to live in states whose programs reach relatively few families in need (Floyd et al., 2021).

These disparities raise questions about whether TANF's policies strengthen family stability or reinforce racialized expectations of family responsibility that undermine Black families' economic security and relationships. This analysis examines how TANF's work requirements, benefit restrictions, and child support enforcement practices affect Black family functioning, with particular attention to Black fathers' ability to remain actively involved in their children's lives. It also considers policy changes that could promote equitable access to assistance, support meaningful father involvement, and strengthen long-term family stability.

Policy Context and Background

Contemporary TANF policy cannot be fully understood apart from the longer history of state regulation of Black family life in the United States (Floyd et al., 2021). Although TANF was established in 1996, the assumptions embedded within contemporary welfare policy – including ideas about dependency, deservingness, parental responsibility, work, marriage, and family structure – developed within a much older racial and political context. For Black families, public policy has historically operated not only as a mechanism for distributing economic resources but also as an institution through which family relationships have been defined, monitored, and regulated (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019). This history is particularly consequential for Black fatherhood because state institutions have repeatedly constructed Black fathers through contradictory narratives: physically absent yet economically responsible, socially deficient yet subject to heightened surveillance, and peripheral to family life while simultaneously held responsible for family economic stability (Wilson & Thompson, 2020). A critical historical analysis therefore situates TANF within a continuum of policies and political narratives that have shaped which Black family relationships receive institutional recognition and under what conditions.

Historical Regulation of Black Families

The roots of this regulatory relationship extended to enslavement, when Black family relationships existed without meaningful legal protection. Enslaved Black fathers possessed no recognized legal authority to prevent the sale, relocation, or separation of their children and other family members, while the economic interest of enslavers routinely superseded family preservation (Johnson-Farias, 2020). Forced separation consequently produced forms of involuntary paternal absence that cannot reasonably be interpreted as evidence of paternal disengagement. Following emancipation, Black families actively sought to reunify and establish legally recognized family relationships, yet racial discrimination, labor exploitation, political exclusion, and restricted economic opportunity continued to constrain Black men's ability to fulfill dominant definitions of provider fatherhood (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019). Black men were thus increasingly judged against economic standards of paternal responsibility while simultaneously confronting structural barriers to obtaining the resources through which those standards were measured. This contradiction contributed to enduring representations of Black fathers as absent or deficient while obscuring the structural conditions affecting their family participation.

The expansion of public assistance during the twentieth century altered the mechanisms through which Black families were regulated but did not eliminate racialized assumptions about family structure and parental responsibility. Welfare administration increasingly authorized government scrutiny of recipients' income, household composition, intimate relationships, and caregiving arrangements. Although such oversight was frequently justified as necessary to establish eligibility and prevent fraud, welfare surveillance operated within a broader social environment in which Black families were disproportionately represented as dependent, dysfunctional, and morally suspect (Floyd et al., 2021). From a Critical Race Theory perspective, the significance of these practices extends beyond whether individual policies explicitly mentioned race. Facial neutrality does not prevent policies from reproducing

racial hierarchy when administrative rules operate within institutions already shaped by racialized constructions of deservingness, dependency, and appropriate family life. Welfare surveillance therefore became one mechanism through which economic assistance was conditioned upon state evaluation of how poor families – and disproportionately Black families – organized their private and familial relationships.

Welfare Surveillance and the Regulation of Father Presence

So-called "man-in-the-house" rules made the relationship between public assistance and father presence especially explicit. Under these practices, welfare agencies could deny or terminate assistance when an adult man was believed to reside in the household or maintain a relationship with the mother. Ostensibly designed to determine whether another adult could provide economic support, such rules transformed paternal presence into a potential threat to a family's eligibility for assistance. The implications for Black families were particularly significant because racialized welfare administration subjected Black mothers and their intimate relationships to heightened scrutiny. Rather than recognizing fathers as potential caregivers, co-parents, or sources of relational support, these policies often treated men primarily as alternative economic providers whose presence could justify withdrawal of public assistance (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019).

The historical importance of these rules extends beyond their formal termination. They institutionalized a policy logic in which the legitimacy of public support became intertwined with state judgments about family composition and paternal economic responsibility (Floyd et al., 2021, Lemmons & Johnson, 2019). For low-income families, this created an enduring tension: a father's involvement could contribute to caregiving and family stability while his presence or income could simultaneously affect a household's eligibility for economic assistance (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019, Rambert, 2021). This history provides an important antecedent for examining contemporary TANF household composition, income, marriage, and child support policies and whether they continue to privilege financial definitions of paternal responsibility over multidimensional forms of father involvement (Floyd et al, 2021; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Rambert, 2021; Wilson & Thompson, 2020).

Racialized Welfare Discourse and the Politics of Personal Responsibility

By the late twentieth century, welfare policy debates increasingly shifted from structural explanations of poverty toward narratives emphasizing individual behavior, dependence, sexuality, work, and family formation. The racialized image of the "welfare queen" became particularly influential in this political transformation. Although welfare policy was formally race-neutral, public discourse frequently associated welfare dependency with Black motherhood, portraying recipients as unwilling to work, sexually irresponsible, excessively dependent on government, and strategically using childbearing to obtain public benefits. These representations transformed poverty from a question of inadequate

economic resources and structural inequality into a problem of personal behavioral and moral responsibility (Floyd et al., 2021; Ojeda et al., 2019).

This racialized construction also had implications for Black fatherhood. The image of the irresponsible welfare mother was reinforced by a complementary construction of the absent or economically irresponsible Black father (Floyd et al., 2021; Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024). Together, these narratives portrayed Black family poverty as the consequence of deficient family behavior rather than structural conditions such as racial discrimination in employment, residential segregation, unequal educational opportunity, and persistent wealth inequality (Floyd et al., 2021). Welfare reform consequently became increasingly concerned not simply with providing economic assistance but with modifying work behavior, reproductive decisions, marriage, and parental financial responsibility (Floyd et al., 2021; Ojeda et al., 2019; Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024).

PRWORA and the Creation of TANF

These political and ideological developments culminated in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, which replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with TANF. PRWORA fundamentally restructured federal cash assistance by replacing the AFDC entitlement with a fixed block grant to states and granting states substantial authority over program design and administration. TANF emphasized employment, time-limited assistance, personal responsibility, reduction of nonmarital childbearing, and the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. These objectives represented more than administrative changes to the delivery of economic assistance; they embedded particular assumptions about work, marriage, parenting, and family responsibility into the architecture of federal welfare policy (Floyd et al., 2021).

For Black fathers and families, the transition from AFDC to TANF therefore warrants examination not simply because the amount and duration of assistance changed, but because TANF institutionalized a model of poverty intervention centered heavily on behavioral and familial regulation (Floyd et al., 2021; Ojeda et al., 2019; Rambert, 2021). The block-grant structure, state discretion, work requirements, sanctions, household-composition rules, marriage-related objectives, and TANF-linked child-support requirements that emerged from PRWORA provide the contemporary policy mechanisms through which these assumptions operate (Floyd et al., 2021; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Letiequ, 2024; Ojeda et al., 2019). The analysis that follows examines whether those mechanisms support Black family economic stability and father involvement, or reproduce historical patterns in which Black family relationships are evaluated through narrow, racialized constructions of dependency, deservingness, and paternal responsibility (Lemmons & Johnson, 2049; Miller & Mincy, 2012; Ojeda et al., 2019).

Literature Review: Black Fatherhood, Family, and Welfare Policy

Scholarship on Black fatherhood reveals a persistent tension between institutional constructions of paternal responsibility and the ways Black fathers participate in their children's lives (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Wilson & Thompson, 2020; Yoon et al., 2025). Welfare and family policy have historically privileged economic provisions, residential status, and formal household relationships as indicators of paternal responsibility, contributing to representations of Black fathers as absent or deficient when they do not conform to these measures (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Rambert, 2021; Wilson & Thompson, 2020). These representations are consequential because policy definitions do more than describe families; they shape how institutions recognize paternal involvement and determine which forms of family participation receive support or sanction (Gallo 2012; Letiecq, 2024; Rambert, 2021). For Black fathers confronting racialized labor-market inequality, economic insecurity, housing instability, or nonresidential parenting arrangements, equating responsible fatherhood primarily with financial provision risks interpreting structural constraint as individual paternal failure (Dubowitz et al., 2008; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Miller & Mincy, 2012; Rambert, 2021).

Research examining welfare and child-support policies demonstrates how this construction operates institutionally. TANF's emphasis on marriage, employment, household income, and personal responsibility reflects a policy model in which family economic self-sufficiency is closely associated with employment and conventional two-parent family formation (Gallo, 2012; Miller & Mincy, 2012). TANF's relationship with the child-support system further positions noncustodial fathers principally as financial providers. Custodial parents receiving TANF are generally required to cooperate with child-support enforcement, while states may retain portions of collected support to reimburse government expenditures rather than passing the full amount to families (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024). For low-income fathers, enforcement mechanisms and accumulated arrears can intensify economic instability when obligations exceed fathers' capacity to pay (Miller & Mincy, 2012; Rambert, 2021). Rambert (2021) describes a self-reinforcing process in which economic disadvantage and child support debt can contribute to the very paternal instability that is subsequently interpreted as evidence of irresponsibility. Empirical research further suggests that these processes are racially consequential: Black families have experienced disproportionate sanctioning in TANF administration, including sanctions associated with child-support noncompliance (Kaplan et al., 2022). Collectively, this literature raises questions about whether policies intended to encourage paternal responsibility may, under some conditions, create economic and relational barriers to sustaining father involvement.

This policy construction contrasts with a substantial empirical literature documenting Black fathers' multidimensional involvement with their children. Research demonstrates that Black fathers provide hands-on caregiving, emotional support, guidance, protection, mentorship, and other forms of childbearing that cannot be captured by financial contributions alone (Jones & Mosher, 2013; Perry et al., 2012). Importantly, paternal involvement is not limited to fathers residing with their children. Research on nonresident Black fathers challenges the conflation of nonresidence with absence and demonstrates continued involvement across varied household arrangements (Jones & Mosher, 2013; Yoon et al., 2025). These findings complicate policy frameworks that rely heavily on residence, household income, and formal support to determine paternal responsibility.

Most recent strengths-based scholarship further expands the conceptualization of Back fatherhood by examining fathers within their cultural, relational, and structural contexts (Rollins et al., 2026; Shears et al., 2026). Research associated with Shears and colleagues has emphasized both Black fathers' strengths and the institutional conditions that can render their contributions less visible within conventional systems of measurement and service delivery (Shears et al., 2026). Recent scholars, for example, identify the systemic invisibility of Black fathers within data and policy systems as distinct from paternal absence, while related scholarship examines racial trauma, housing instability, mental health, and fathers' protective contributions to child development (J. D. Roberts, 2025; Rollins et al., 2026; Shears et al., 2026). This work shifts analysis away from deficit explanations of Black fatherhood toward structural circumstances within which fathers exercise parental roles (J.D., Roberts, 2025; Rollins et al., 2026; Shears et al., 2026).

Black fatherhood scholarship also situates paternal involvement within broader Black family and kinship systems (Caldwell et al., 2026; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019). Fathers contribute to racial socialization by preparing children to navigate discrimination while fostering cultural identity and pride, and caregiving may occur through extended-family and kinship networks that distribute responsibility beyond a conventional nuclear household (Caldwell et al., 2026; Lee et al., 2026). Such findings are consistent with culturally grounded understandings of Black family life, in which caregiving, protection, emotional presence, guidance, and reciprocal responsibility constitute meaningful dimensions of parental involvement (Caldwell et al., 2026).

Taken together, the literature reveals a consequential policy-related gap. TANF and related child-support structures frequently operationalize paternal responsibility through economic provision, household composition, and formal obligations (Floyd et al., 2021; Gallo, 2012; Rambert, 2021; Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024). In contrast, Black fatherhood scholarship conceptualizes and documents paternal involvement as multidimensional, relational, and embedded within broader family and structural contexts (Caldwell et al., 2026; Jones & Mosher, 2013; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Perry et al., 2012; Rollins et al., 2026; Shears et al., 2026; Wilson & Thompson, 2020; Yoon et al., 2025). The relevant policy question is therefore not simply whether Black fathers are involved, but whether TANF's definitions and administrative mechanisms adequately recognize and support – or inadvertently constrain – the forms of father involvement and family organization documented in empirical literature.

Problem Definition

Policy scholars have long recognized that public policies do not simply respond to social problems; they also shape how those problems are understood and which interventions become politically legitimate. Stone (1989) describes this process through "causal stories" that assign responsibility for social conditions, distinguish deserving from undeserving populations, and direct attention toward particular policy solutions. Similarly, Rochefort and Cobb (1993) argue that problem definition is consequential because how policymakers characterize a condition influences whose interests receive attention, which causes are emphasized, and which policy responses are considered appropriate. TANF must therefore

be evaluated not only by its administrative or fiscal outcomes but also by how it defines poverty, family responsibility, and responsible parenthood.

The central problem examined in this analysis is the extent to which TANF constructs family responsibility – and Black fatherhood in particular – through a policy framework that privileges employment, formal financial provision, household income, and conventional family organization. TANF's emphasis on work, economic self-sufficiency, marriage, and parental financial responsibility reflects a broader policy construction in which poverty and dependency are addressed substantially through changes in individual and family behavior. Within this framework, fathers may be recognized primarily through their capacity to provide economically, particularly through employment, household income, and formal child-support obligations (Cancian et al., 2011; Miller & Mincy, 2012; Mick, 2001).

This construction creates an important tension with contemporary scholarship on Black fatherhood and family. Research documents paternal contributions that extend beyond economic provision to include caregiving, co-parenting, emotional support, mentorship, protection, advocacy, and other forms of relational involvement (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Wilson & Thompson, 2020). The policy concern is therefore not unimportant, but whether TANF privileges one dimension of paternal responsibility in ways that inadequately recognize the multidimensional and culturally situated forms of father involvement that contribute to Black family well-being. Accordingly, this analysis examines how TANF's policy design operationalizes particular definitions of responsible fatherhood and whether those definitions support or constrain Black fathers' involvement and Black family stability.

Analytical Framework and Method

Analytical Framework

This study employs a critical historical policy analysis informed by CRT, strengths-based perspectives, and Africana-centered scholarship to examine how TANF policy shapes Black fatherhood and Black family life (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Letiecq, 2024; Wilson & Thompson, 2020). Critical policy analysis extends beyond assessments of program effectiveness to interrogate how historical context, institutional structures, and seemingly neutral administrative practices distribute power and produce inequitable outcomes (Fording et al., 2007; Ojeda, 2019; Rochefort & Cobb, 1993; Schram et al., 2009; Stone, 1989; Young & Diem, 2017). Accordingly, the analysis examines not only TANF's stated objectives but also how its definitions of family responsibility operate within a longer history of racialized family regulation (Floyd et al., 2021; Mink, 2001; Rambert, 2021).

CRT provides the principal race-conscious lens for this analysis. CRT recognizes racism as embedded within the ordinary functioning of legal and institutional systems rather than limited to explicitly discriminatory actions, allowing formally race-neutral policies to reproduce racial inequality through their design and implementation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Applied to TANF, CRT directs attention to how state discretion, eligibility requirements, sanctions, household rules, and child-support policies may

produce racially disparate consequences even when race is absent from statutory language. This perspective also situates contemporary constructions of dependency, deservingness, and family responsibility within the historical regulation of Black families (D. E. Roberts, 2002, 2022).

Strengths-based and Africana-centered perspectives provide a complementary framework for evaluating the family assumptions embedded within TANF. Rather than treating dominant nuclear-family arrangements or economic provision as universal measures of family functioning, these perspectives recognize Black family life as relational and frequently supported through communality, extended kinship networks, reciprocal responsibility, and shared caregiving (Hill, 2003; McAdoo, 2007). Within this framework, fatherhood encompasses financial provision as well as caregiving, co-parenting, protection, mentorship, emotional support, and cultural and racial socialization. These perspectives, therefore, provide a culturally grounded benchmark for assessing whether TANF recognizes or constrains the multidimensional forms of parental involvement and collective caregiving documented within Black families.

Methodological Approach

A qualitative, critical, historical policy analysis was used to examine TANF's development, policy design, implementation mechanisms, and implications for Black fathers and families (Rochefort & Cobb, 1993; Stone, 1989; Young & Diem, 2017). The analysis focused on major policy mechanisms relevant to family and paternal involvement, including the block-grant structure and state discretion; eligibility and household-composition rules; work requirements and sanctions; marriage and two-parent-family objectives; TANF-linked child-support enforcement; and frontline administrative discretion (Floyd et al., 2021; Fording et al., 2007; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Rambert, 2021; Simpson et al., 2024). These mechanisms are interpreted within their historical context and through the theoretical perspectives described above to identify how TANF constructs and operationalizes family and parental responsibility.

The analysis also incorporates quantitative and empirical evidence – including state variation in TANF access, benefit adequacy, sanctions, program spending, and administrative outcomes – to evaluate whether observed patterns are consistent with the policy concerns identified through the critical analysis (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022; Floyd et al., 2021; Fording et al., 2007; Schram et al., 2009; Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022; Simpson et al., 2024). Quantitative evidence is used to contextualize and assess policy consequences rather than to conduct an independent causal evaluation of TANF. Collectively, this approach permits examination of both policy design and policy alignment: how TANF operates and whether its assumptions and administrative structures recognize, support, or constrain the culturally grounded strengths of Black fatherhood and Black family systems.

TANF Policy Design and Black Fatherhood

TANF Policy Design and Black Fatherhood

TANF's implications for Black fatherhood are embedded across interconnected policy mechanisms that define economic need, family responsibility, and parental obligation (Rambert, 2021). Through its block-

grant structure, TANF grants states substantial authority over eligibility, benefit levels, work requirements, sanctions, household rules, and program spending (Floyd et al., 2021). These mechanisms are particularly relevant to Black fathers because they determine how paternal presence, income, and responsibility become administratively recognized within a program that simultaneously seeks to promote employment, family stability, and two-parent families.

Block Grants, Devolution, and State Discretion

The PRWORA replaced AFDC federal entitlement structure with a fixed TANF block grant, transferring substantial program authority to states. States consequently exercise broad discretion over eligibility standards, benefit levels, sanctions, work-related policies, and allocations of TANF resources within federal parameters. This devolution means families experiencing comparable economic hardship may encounter substantially different assistance systems depending on where they reside (Floyd et al., 2021). From a Critical Race Theory perspective, such discretion warrants attention because formally race-neutral policy choices can produce racially unequal consequences when implemented within historically and institutionally unequal contexts (Delgado & Stenfancic, 2017).

Eligibility and Household Composition

TANF operationalizes family responsibility through rules determining who constitutes an assistance unit, whose income is countable, and how household changes affect eligibility and benefits (Floyd et al., 2021; Simpson et al., 2024). Although these mechanisms are necessary for determining financial needs, they also establish how fathers become visible within the program. A resident father's earnings or other countable resources may alter a family's eligibility or benefit amount, making paternal presence administratively consequential primarily through economic capacity.

This creates potential tension between TANF's eligibility structure and its family-stability objectives. Because states differ in how they define assistance units, count household income, and apply earned income disregards, changes in cohabitation and household composition may alter a family's eligibility or benefit amount (Floyd et al., 2021; Simpson et al., 2024). These rules can make resident fathers most administratively visible through their income and other countable resources. This economic emphasis contrasts with scholarship documenting Black fathers' involvement through caregiving, co-parenting, emotional support, mentorship, protection, and other relational contributions (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Wilson & Thompson, 2020).

Work Requirements, Sanctions, and Administrative Burden

TANF further operationalizes personal responsibility through work participation requirements and sanctions for noncompliance. Although employment can strengthen economic security, states possess considerable authority over how work requirements are implemented and how noncompliance is addressed (Floyd et al., 2021). Families must also navigate reporting, verification, appointments, documentation, and caseworker determinations to maintain assistance.

Research suggests that discretion within these processes can have racial consequences (Fording et al., 2007; Schram et al., 2009). Schram et al., (2009) found that discrediting social markers (such as a prior sanction) significantly increased sanction recommendations for Black clients under frontline discretionary conditions. Soss et al. (2011) similarly demonstrated how local administrative decentralization allowed regional political values to shape sanctioning, with Black recipients experiencing higher sanctions risks over time. These findings suggest that TANF's racial implications arise not only from statutory requirements but also from the administrative structures through which those requirements are enforced (Fording et al., 2007; Schram et al., 2009).

Marriage and Two-Parent Family Assumptions

TANF's statutory purposes extend beyond income assistance to include reducing nonmarital pregnancies and encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families (Floyd et al., 2021; Letiecqu, 2024). Subsequent initiatives have similarly promoted marriage and responsible fatherhood (Gallo, 2010; Tollestrup, 2018). TANF, therefore, embeds assumptions about the family arrangement associated with economic stability and child well-being (Letiecq, 2024).

Black fatherhood scholarship complicates the use of marital or residential status as a proxy for paternal involvement. Black fathers participate in their children's lives across married, cohabiting, nonresident, and extended-family arrangements (Perry et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2025). A father-inclusive analysis must therefore distinguish father engagement from marital and residential status rather than presume that conventional household organization adequately measures paternal involvement.

TANF-linked Child-Support Cooperation and Enforcement

TANF's relationship with child-support enforcement provides the clearest example of paternal responsibility being operationalized financially. Custodial parents receiving TANF generally must cooperate with child-support enforcement, and states may retain portions of collected support to reimburse public-assistance expenditures rather than passing the full amount to families (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024). Low-income noncustodial fathers may also encounter arrears and enforcement mechanisms that compound existing economic instability (Miller & Mincy, 2012; Rambert, 2021).

These mechanisms serve the legitimate purpose of establishing parental financial responsibility; however, their design raises questions about fathers' actual ability to pay and whether retaining child support government reimbursement maximizes children's economic well-being. Rambert (2021) describes a cyclical relationship among economic disadvantages, child-support debt, enforcement, and paternal instability. Kaplan et al. (2022) similarly found disproportionate sanctioning among Black TANF families in Illinois, including sanctions associated with child-support compliance. Thus, the concern is not whether fathers should financially support their children, but whether policies designed to enforce responsibility can undermine the economic conditions necessary to sustain that responsibility.

Administrative Discretion and Surveillance

Administrative discretion connects these mechanisms. Caseworkers evaluate income, residency, household composition, documentation, compliance, and circumstances that may justify exemptions or good cause (Fording et al., 2007; Lens, 2008). For fathers, verification of residence and financial contribution can determine how paternal presence affects family eligibility or obligations (Kaplan et al., 2022; Rambert, 2021). Contemporary TANF verification is not equivalent to historical man-in-the-house rules; nevertheless, viewed within the longer history of welfare surveillance, it raises a related question about whether fathers remain institutionally recognized primarily through their economic implications for the household (Rambert, 2021). The interaction of federal devolution, state discretion, and frontline administration therefore provides the structural basis for examining racial disparities in TANF access and administration (Fording et al., 2007; Kaplan et al., 2022).

Racial Disparities in TANF Access and Administration

TANF's decentralized structure has produced substantial state variations in access, benefit adequacy, program administration, and resource allocation. These differences are racially consequential because Black families are disproportionately concentrated in states where TANF reaches fewer families experiencing poverty and where smaller shares of program resources are devoted to basic case assistance (Floyd et al., 2021). These patterns do not demonstrate that every restrictive state policy is motivated by racial animus; rather, they illustrate how geographically uneven policy choices can generate racially unequal consequences.

Access and Benefit Adequacy

The TANF-to-Poverty Ratio (TPR), which compares the number of families receiving TANF case assistance with the number of families with children experiencing poverty, illustrates the program's decline and uneven reach. Nationally, TANF provides cash assistance to 21 families for every 100 families with children in poverty in 2020, compared with 68 families receiving assistance through AFDC in 1996. State TPRs ranged from 71 in California and Vermont to 4 in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas (Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). Importantly, approximately 41% of Black children lived in states with TPRs of 10 or less, compared with 29% of White children and 34% of Latinx children (Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). Black families experiencing poverty are, therefore, disproportionately likely to reside in states where TANF case assistance has particularly limited reach.

Benefit adequacy also varies substantially across states. In 2020, maximum TANF benefits for a family of three were below one-half of the federal poverty line in nearly every state. Black children were also disproportionately represented in states with the lowest benefit levels (Floyd et al., 2021). Access and adequacy must therefore be considered together: obtaining TANF does not necessarily mean receiving sufficient assistance to substantially reduce material hardship.

Sanctions and Administrative Discretion

Racial disparities are also evident in TANF administration. Schram et al. (2009) found higher sanction recommendations for Black clients when discrediting markers where present under frontline

discretionary conditions, while Fording et al. (2007) demonstrates that local political conservatism and administrative devolution exacerbated sanction risks for Black clients over time. Kaplan et al. (2022) likewise documented disproportionate sanctioning among Black families in Illinois, including sanctions involving child-support compliance. Collectively, these findings suggest that administrative structure and the degree of frontline discretion are important components of TANF's racial equity implications.

Allocation of TANF Resources

Devolution also permits substantial variations in how states allocate TANF resources. By fiscal year 2022, appropriately 23% of combined federal TANF and state maintenance-of-effort to spending nationally was devoted to basic assistance, with remaining resources supporting child care, work activities and supports, refundable tax credits, prekindergarten and Head State, child welfare, administration, and other allowable activities (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024) Although many of these services benefit low-income families, the spending patterns reflect TANF's transformation from primarily case assistance into a broader funding mechanism.

The racial distribution of state spending patterns is notable. In 2020, approximately 41% of Black children lived in states spending 10% or less of TANF resources on basic assistance, compared with 34% of White and Latinx children (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022). Azevedo-McCaffrey and Safawi (2022) also report that, after accounting for other factors, states with higher concentrations of Black residents or a higher prevalence of anti-Black stereotypes among White residents devote smaller shares of their TANF resources to cash assistance. These findings are particularly important to a critical analysis of devolution: state flexibility does not operate on a racially neutral geographic landscape.

Taken together, the empirical evidence demonstrates that TANF's decentralized structure produces substantial variations in who receives assistance, how benefits are administered, and how resources are allocated (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022; Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). Black families are disproportionately represented in jurisdictions where cash assistance reaches fewer families experiencing poverty and where smaller shares of TANF funding are directed toward basic assistance; research also documents racial disparities in sanctioning and discretionary administration (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022; Kaplan et al, 2022; Schram et al., 2009). These patterns provide the empirical foundation for examining how TANF's policy structure affects Black fathers, mothers, children, and family systems.

Key Stakeholders

TANF policy engages multiple stakeholders whose interests, authority, and exposure to policy consequences differ substantially. Black fathers, mothers, and children are the primary affected stakeholders, as eligibility rules, benefit levels, work requirements, sanctions, and child-support policies directly shape families' access to economic resources and the institutional recognition of parental responsibility. Black fathers have a particular stake in policies that define paternal responsibility primarily through household income and formal financial provision, despite evidence that their involvement also

encompasses caregiving, emotional support, guidance, role modeling, and other forms of engagement (Dubowitz et al., 2006; Roy, 2006).

Federal and state policymakers and TANF agencies constitute the principal institutional stakeholders. Federal policymakers establish TANF's statutory purposes and financing structure, while states exercise substantial authority over eligibility and compliance within federal parameters (Tollestrup, 2018). Consequently, administrative and organizational discretion can shape families experiences of formally race-neutral requirements (Fording et al., 2007; Soss et al., 2011).

Child-support agencies and Black communities are also consequential stakeholders. Child-support agencies administer and enforce financial obligations affecting custodial families and noncustodial fathers (Rambert, 2021; Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024). Black communities experience the cumulative consequences of policies affecting family economic security, family formation, and parental involvement (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022; Floyd et al., 2021; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019). These stakeholders do not possess equal policy power: families and communities experience TANF's consequences, whereas governmental actors largely determine the rules, resource allocations, and administrative practices that produce those consequences (Floyd et al., 2021; Fording et al., 2007; Ojeda et al., 2019). This imbalance makes stakeholder interests and institutional authority central to the evaluation of equitable TANF reform.

Impacts of Black Fathers and Black Families

The policy mechanisms and racial disparities identified above have implications that extend beyond the receipt of cash assistance. TANF operates within family systems; consequently, policies governing household composition, income, employment, sanctions, and child support can influence fathers, mothers, children, and the relationships connecting them (Kaplan et al., 2022; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Rambert, 2021).

Father Involvement and Family Stability

TANF's household and eligibility rules may affect decisions concerning co-residence and resource sharing because changes in household composition and paternal income can alter eligibility or benefit levels (Floyd et al., 2021). These economic considerations can create tension between maintaining access to assistance and household arrangements families consider beneficial. Such effects are particularly important for Black fathers because nonresidence should not be conflated with paternal absence. Research documents continued involvement through caregiving, emotional support, mentorship, and co-parenting across residential arrangements (Jones & Mosher, 2013; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019).

Child-support enforcement adds another dimension to this tension. Orders and enforcement practices that exceed economically disadvantaged fathers' capacity to pay may generate arrears and other financial consequences that compound existing instability (Rambert, 2021). When paternal responsibility

is institutionally recognized primarily through economic provision, fathers' relational and caregiving contributions may remain largely invisible even when they are actively involved with their children.

Economic and Family Well-Being

These policies also affect mothers and children. Sanctions or case closures can reduce already limited household resources, while inadequate cash benefits leave families exposed to material hardship (Floyd et al., 2021; Kaplan et al., 2022). These patterns are particularly consequential because Black families are disproportionately likely to reside in states where TANF reaches fewer families experiencing poverty and where comparatively little TANF funding is devoted to basic assistance (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022; Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). Economic insecurity can, in turn, constrain employment and complicate family relationships and shared parenting responsibilities (Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Miller & Mincy, 2012; Rambert, 2021).

These consequences should not be interpreted as deficiencies within Black families, which have historically mobilized extended kin, shared caregiving, and community networks in response to economic and structural constraints. Fathers may contribute within these systems through caregiving, guidance, protection, mentorship, and racial socialization in addition to financial provision (Cabrera et al., 2018; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019). TANF's limited recognition of these contributions represents a mismatch between administrative definitions of family responsibility and the multidimensional family processes that support resilience.

The cumulative impact is therefore both material and relational. Restrictive access, inadequate benefits, sanctioning, and economically centered definitions of paternal responsibility can constrain family resources while offering limited institutional support for father engagement and collective caregiving (Floyd et al., 2021; Kaplan et al., 2022; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Rambert, 2021). A father-inclusive TANF framework must consequently address economic hardship without treating financial provision as the sole measure of paternal responsibility or conventional household structures as the sole indicator of family stability.

Policy Recommendations

The preceding analysis suggests that father-inclusive TANF reform requires more than adding responsible-fatherhood programming to an otherwise unchanged policy structure. Reform should address the mechanisms through which TANF defines economic need, paternal responsibility, administrative compliance, and family support.

Reform Eligibility and Household Rules

States should use their existing discretion to reduce eligibility rules that make modest parental earnings disproportionately consequential to family assistance. Expanded earned-income disregards for resident parents and co-parents could permit families to retain assistance while household earnings increase, reducing tensions between economic eligibility and family co-residence (Simpson et al., 2024). Such reform would not eliminate means-testing; TANF already employs income disregards to advance policy

objectives such as employment. Similar flexibility can recognize family stability as a legitimate program objective.

Eligibility reform should also strengthen recognition of extended and kinship caregiving. States can improve access to child-only TANF grants by simplifying applications, training workers to identify eligible kin caregivers, and eliminating state-imposed caregiving income or assets tests where federal law does not require them (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022; Floyd et al., 2021; Shrivastava & Thompson; Simpson et al., 2024). These reforms better align TANF with family systems in which caregiving responsibility may extend beyond a nuclear household (Floyd et al., 2021; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019).

Reduce Punitive and Discretionary Administration

States should establish structured safeguards before sanctions or case closures occur, including meaningful opportunities to demonstrate good cause, written decision criteria, and secondary review of adverse sanctions. Evidence that devolution and unstructured frontline discretion enable racial bias and local political values to drive sanctioning decisions suggest that limiting administrative discretion can function as an equity intervention (Fording et al., 2007; Schram et al., 2009). Agencies should also publicly report sanctions, case closures, benefit denials, and related administrative outcomes by race. Training on racial bias and culturally responsive practice should accompany these structural protections rather than substitute for them.

Federal reform should further establish stronger national minimum standards for access and benefit adequacy (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022; Floyd et al., 2021; Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). The substantial state variation in TPR and benefit levels demonstrates that residence currently determines whether similarly situated families encounter relatively accessible or highly restrictive systems (Floyd et al., 2021; Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022). A federal benefit floor tied to poverty measures, accompanied by stronger requirements that states direct meaningful TANF resources toward basic assistance, would preserve state flexibility while limiting extreme geographic inequality (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022; Floyd et al., 2021).

Modernized Child-Support Policy

TANF-linked child support should prioritize directing resources to children rather than government cost recovery. States should adopt full pass-through and disregard policies so that support paid by noncustodial fathers reaches families without reducing TANF benefits. Maryland provides a contemporary example of a state utilizing federal options to expand pass-through distribution, while federal law permits states substantial authority in these areas (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024).

Child-support orders should also reflect fathers' actual ability to pay. Federal guidance already supports low-income adjustments, self-support reserves, and consideration of noncustodial parents' subsistence needs when establishing orders (Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement

Programs, 2016). States should pair realistic orders with accessible modification procedures and reconsider enforcement practices – such as license suspension – that undermine employment and, consequently, reduce fathers' capacity to provide support. These reforms preserve paternal financial responsibility while reducing the likelihood that poverty itself produces accumulating debt and punitive enforcement (Rambert, 2021).

Reorientation TANF Toward Father-Inclusive Family Strengthening

Finally, TANF should recognize responsible fatherhood as multidimensional rather than synonymous with marriage, residence, or financial provision. States can use existing TANF authority and responsible-fatherhood funding to support culturally responsive employment assistance, co-parenting services, parenting programs, reentry support, and relationship-building interventions without conditioning recognition of father involvement on marital status (Simpson et al., 2024; Tollestrup, 2018). Programs should explicitly recognize caregiving, mentorship, protection, emotional support, and racial socialization alongside economic provision (Caldwell et al., 2026; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Tollestrup, 2018).

Collectively, these reforms shift TANF from a framework that primarily regulates and measures family responsibility toward one that also invests in the conditions that make family responsibility possible (Floyd et al., 2021; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024). Father-inclusive reform does not diminish expectations of employment or financial support; it situates those expectations within policies that strengthen economic security, reduce racially disparate administrative burdens, and recognize the broader contributions Black fathers make to children and families (Azevedo-McCaffrey & Safawi, 2022; Cabrera et al., 2018; Floyd et al., 2021; Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Rambert. 2021, Tollestrup, 2018).

Conclusion

This critical policy analysis examined TANF not simply as an income-assistance program, but as a policy structure that defines family responsibility and shapes how paternal involvement becomes institutionally recognized. Situated within the historical regulation of Black family life, TANF's contemporary emphasis on employment, household income, marriage, child-support enforcement, and administrative compliance reveals a persistent tension between the program's family-stability objectives and the mechanisms through which those objectives are pursued (Floyd et al., 2021; D. E. Roberts, 2002). Empirical evidence further demonstrates that TANF's decentralized structure has produced substantial state variation in access, benefit adequacy, sanctioning, and resource allocation, with disproportionately restrictive consequences for Black families (Floyd et al., 2021; Fording et al., 2007; Shrivastava & Thompson, 2022).

Central to this analysis is the distinction between financial provision as an important dimension of fatherhood and financial provision as an adequate policy definition of fatherhood. Black fatherhood scholarship documents paternal involvement through caregiving, co-parenting, emotional support, mentorship, protection, and other relational contributions across residential and family arrangements

(Lemmons & Johnson, 2019; Perry et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2025). A father-inclusive TANF framework therefore requires policy structures that preserve expectations of economic responsibility while recognizing and supporting these broader contributions. Reforms to eligibility, administrative discretion, child support enforcement, and family support programming offer opportunities to better align TANF's implementation with its stated commitments to child well-being and family stability.

As a critical historical policy analysis, this study identifies structural relationships rather than establishing causal effects. Future research should examine how TANF and child-support reforms affect father involvement and family well-being across states and should incorporate Black fathers' experiences with frontline administration. Ultimately, advancing racial equity in TANF requires moving beyond policies that primarily measure and regulate family responsibility toward policies that also strengthen families' capacity to exercise it.

Declarations

Author Contribution

A.A.S conceptualized the policy analysis and drafted the policy context and background, problem definition, stakeholder analysis, and analysis of impacts on Black fathers and families. B.B. drafted the introduction. F. M. developed the analytical framework and methodological approach and drafted those sections. J. D. R. drafted the literature review, policy recommendations, and conclusion. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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