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USA

Hillary Clinton's Family Values

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Hillary Clinton's support for policies like welfare reform belie her claim to be a champion of children.

Hillary Clinton is well-versed in child welfare issues, having devoted much of her career to them, and her views, at first glance, seem progressive. Her popular 1996 book, *It Takes a Village*, starts from the premise that "children will thrive only if their families thrive and if the whole of society cares enough to provide for them." She emphasizes the need to give parents "the physical, financial, and emotional support they need to raise children well," and argued that government "cannot retreat from its historic obligations to the poor and vulnerable."

But these words are difficult to reconcile with Clinton's actions in her long political career. Most troublesome is her support for the 1996 "welfare reform" act, which replaced the longstanding Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

In a chapter she wrote for a 1979 book on children's rights, she urges the development of "a family policy in this country that provides stigma-free assistance to families in trouble." Yet TANF is one of the most stigmatizing programs we have.

Under TANF, many states maintain a "family cap" rule, which denies benefits to any additional children born to a mother receiving assistance from the program. For "approved" children, arbitrary time limits are placed on the receipt of benefits, regardless of whether their needs outlast the time limits. And if mothers fail to comply with job-training, job search, and work requirements, it is their children who see their benefits reduced or get kicked off the program.

These reforms are all aimed at controlling mothers' behaviors. In her 2003 memoir, *Living History*, Clinton explains her support for TANF: "I didn't think it was fair that one single mother improvised to find child care and got up early every day to get to work while another stayed home and relied on welfare."

Never mind that the welfare such a mother relied on was a pittance. She was not deserving of it. The TANF program would fix the recalcitrant mother by placing conditions on her "Euros" and her child's "Euros" receipt of even the most minimal assistance.

In addition to backing TANF, Clinton proudly claims to have been the driving force behind the [Adoption and Safe Families Act \(ASFA\)](#) of 1997. She writes in *Living History* that she "convened adoption experts in a series of White House meetings" and "outlined a blueprint" that led to the legislation's passage.

ASFA has provided states with financial incentives to adopt more children out of foster care each year than they did previously, and sets an arbitrary time limit (fifteen months) on the termination of parental rights for children in foster care.

The national foster care population has always consisted predominantly of children from indigent families. Many believe that only children who have been severely abused or neglected by their parents, poor or not, are removed by the government and placed in foster care. This is far from the case. It is not unusual for children to be put in foster care due to a family's inadequate housing or outright homelessness, lack of resources, or inability to obtain day care.

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As a result of ASFA, adoptions of children out of foster care leaped to 50,000 children per year in 2000, and have not dipped below that number since. Based on 2011 federal data, on any given day almost [one million children](#) "are residing" in adoptive homes or foster care, placed there by the public child welfare system. These figures represent the greatest government-sponsored mass transfer of poor children from their own homes in our country's history.

ASFA rests on the fantasy that by removing impoverished children from their houses, we can avoid "rewarding" their "undeserving" parents without harming the children themselves, and that we can promote "permanence" of children's living arrangements (through adoption) while undermining it in their own homes.

Government has always supported poor children more generously in other people's homes than in their own. Clinton's version of children's rights does not appear to include the right to be sustained within their own families.

In contrast to this view of government as judge of deservedness and distributor of rewards, penalties, and incentives is the recognition of the existence of a communal wealth that belongs to all of us. Indeed, both physical and social infrastructures, some built long before any of us were even born, have produced a common wealth beyond what any of us can be said to have earned on our own.

Children have not done anything to deserve a share of this bounty, nor has anyone else. But they are entitled to it as members of the community, as are unemployed adults and adults who have never been employed. Rather than continuing to remove poor children from their own homes, we should provide both parents and children their fair piece of the community pie, and cast aside the delusion that we can or should assist children without assisting their parents.

Clinton doesn't seem to understand this. While her campaign fundraising letters claim she has spent her entire life "fighting for children and families," her record suggests otherwise.

[Jacobin](#)