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## The Barriers of Bigotry

Contribution to GTI Forum [Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?](#)

Leah Hamilton

While Guy Standing's [opener](#) deftly outlines and counters economic objections to a basic income, he does not address the (usually) unspoken wall standing before a century of anti-poverty activists in the US: American racism and sexism. While advocates (including myself) argue that a basic income is a more humane and ethical approach to poverty alleviation, researchers have found that white Americans, who unconsciously associate social programs with black communities (counter to statistical realities), struggle to feel empathy towards those who do not look like them, undermining appeals to humanity and universality. This cross-racial empathy gap is present among people of all races but is especially significant when whites make up 73% of voters, 78% of Congress, and over 80% of state legislators.

This year's "Summer of Racial Reckoning" has brought into focus this reality, which poverty scholars have known for decades: the United States is steeped in racial inequality and white supremacy. Institutionalized racism is present at every level of government, including policing, public education, and social policy. In the American social safety net, racism intersects with sexism and classism to form a system whose primary purpose is to punish Black women with low incomes. Intersectional theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that modern social welfare is a legacy of slavery's commodification of the lives and reproduction of Black women.

In the early twentieth century, America's growing social safety net was popular among white Americans. Welfare programs at the time primarily reinforced racist, sexist, and classist norms, which included denying aid for children born out of wedlock and intentional gaps in coverage that excluded most women of color. For example, welfare offices in rural Black communities would often close during harvest time to ensure a steady stream of cheap labor. "Man-in-the-

house” rules destabilized the Black family and institutionalized the surveillance of Black women, with documented cases of workers peering through women’s windows in the middle of the night. When Black women did receive aid, it was often much less than white women, with some welfare offices having separate sample budgets by race.

The tide of white sentiment towards social programs turned in the 1960s when organizers demanded the end of racist welfare practices and Black enrollment increased. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan successfully tapped into growing white backlash to the Civil Rights movement and defunded many social programs by utilizing racist dog whistles, describing a “welfare queen in Chicago” on the campaign trail. The racist conservative movement delivered its final blow to the American safety net in 1996, when Bill Clinton “ended welfare as we know it,” imposing five-year lifetime limits and strict work requirements. While the newly created program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, is touted as a positive step towards work and independence, sexist and racist practices persist. Researchers have discovered that states with higher Black populations have more punitive and paternalistic eligibility rules in their welfare programs. States can deny aid if participant women have additional children or refuse to identify non-custodial fathers. It requires mothers under the age of 18 to live with their parents, unless married, suggesting that young women must be supervised by either adults or a male partner, but cannot be trusted on their own.

While the growing racial justice movement suggests that America may be ready to address institutionalized racism, there is a long road ahead. To be effective, basic income advocates must navigate the barriers described above. This may mean calling out the deeply racist and sexist foundations of our current system. However, for many, calls for universal humanity are better replaced with appeals to individual rather than the collective benefit. If basic income advocates such as Standing cannot reckon with the prejudice rampant in American social policy, I fear that the movement will be easily co-opted by the likes of Charles Murray who wants to see basic income replace every social institution, including health care and public education, ultimately exacerbating racial and gender inequality.

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## About the Author



Leah Hamilton is Associate Professor of Social Work at Appalachian State University. She teaches courses on social welfare policy and conducts research related to family financial stability and basic income. Her work has been featured in *The Atlantic*, *National Public Radio*, *Governing Magazine*, and *Bloomberg View*. She serves on the boards of the ACLU of North Carolina, the Basic Income Earth Network, and Influencing Social Policy. Her latest book is *Welfare Doesn't Work: The Promises of Basic Income for a Failed American Safety Net*. She holds a PhD in public policy from the University of Arkansas.

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