

Losses and Loathing in the Welfare Years

*“You go to welfare when you got no place else, it’s the worst,
the last stop.”*

—RENATA, 1990 LIFE-HISTORY STUDY

What follows early childbearing for most young women in poor America are the welfare years, the years of being caught in the confines and culture of welfare institutions. Teenage mothers in low-income America often can find help in no other quarter. Usually their birth families are very low on resources. Stretched thin by competing needs and out of patience with a daughter who threatens to increase those needs by bringing a baby home, birth families sometimes force out a pregnant girl. Or sometimes the same tensions cause family conflicts to so escalate high that a girl chooses to leave home. While these studies indicate that many birth families offered some help to pregnant daughters, and some assimilated the next generation into the family circle, two-thirds of all the women interviewed who had borne babies when they were under the age of twenty were living separately from their families within two years of those births.

Most of these young mothers found little support from their boyfriends. The interviews indicated that boyfriends (and, in two cases, husbands) were largely missing within two years of the children’s births, as well. Luscious, now thirty-four, remarked, “It’s like, as my belly got bigger and bigger, he started to really realize what was coming, and the bigger I got, the less he came over.” While the birth of a baby might temporarily draw young parents together, their unity was often short-lived. These women observed that even young men who had committed to help raise a child became increasingly ill at ease with

the impending birth and then the reality of a newborn. Several young women sympathetically described ways in which their brothers had reacted to a girlfriend's pregnancy. If a boy has nothing to give, they said, that is, nothing beyond his affection, then he starts to feel bad, to feel "less a man." When the boy's girlfriend, who is frightened by her situation, starts needing more and more from him, she often begins criticizing him, his friends, and his lifestyle. She wants him suddenly to transform himself into a supporting man, with an income and a real understanding of fatherhood. She wants him to reassure her again and again of his love because she is so scared. In other words, as explained by an older sister of a brother who left his girlfriend and daughter behind, she does everything a woman can do to drive a young man away. The majority of women in these interviews reported being estranged from the father of their child by the baby's first birthday.

So, for many of these low-income mothers, two significant sources of financial and emotional support—the family and the father of the child—very quickly disappeared. Those losses were evident in the way these women talked about this period of their lives. More than anything, they spoke of little erosions which finally wear you down into someone you don't want to be. They spoke of chronic exhaustion. They spoke of having no car, no warm coats, no baby clothes, no functioning laundry in the building, no elevator and many stairs, no heat sometimes, no Pampers, no tampons, of long lines at clinics, and of being able to go only to stores which accept food stamps, and, above all, of having no one to "offer a kind word." They spoke of being scared, angry, and alone both inside and outside.

Given all of this, it should come as no surprise that most of these women, and by their accounts, also their mothers, sisters, and others, spent several years on welfare while raising young children. The statistics for the Life-History Study are very similar to national data. More than half of these families spent less than five years on welfare, about 20 percent spent less than a year. But some, particularly those who had

more than one child and had not yet completed high school, were likely to be on welfare for much longer.

When I asked women about the popular idea that there is a “welfare culture,” they were emphatic that this was so. They said it is a culture in which incoherence rules, where the game changes weekly, where paperwork disappears, and the same forms must be filled out again and again, but no one can say why. They said it is a culture of listless caseworkers who cite rules and regulations but cannot explain them. They recalled appointments abruptly canceled and rescheduled without notice or regard to any other obligations a woman might have. They described a culture of mandates, a snarl of housing, job training, Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Medicaid, and other regulations which sometimes contradict each other. And if you look straight into the eyes of the public official, these women claimed, there is a certain wink there, a silent acknowledgment that, no, there is no map to guide you because there is no intent that you should find your way. Occasionally someone *will* advise you, they said. Occasionally, an empathetic welfare worker will suggest how to navigate a particularly chaotic passage, but mostly they stare back at you without response or affect. All of it “stinks of stigma,” said Veronica, a single mother of two in her mid-thirties who used welfare intermittently while her children were little.

And, you may even meet a caseworker who will harass you or try to take advantage of you because they can get away with it, because *no one is watching their behavior*. Above all, women remembered long, long waits which might lead to nothing at all. Being kept waiting can teach you that your time is without value, that your own effort and efficiency is not expected or noticed.

“It’s not about making sense,” said Veronica. “It’s supposed to make you feel helpless, make you feel you are trash.”

Nemesis, also in her thirties, said, “They see you as a commodity,

one that no one wants. They hold you in contempt so you'd better do the same back."

And Luscious said, "There's this smell I have only smelled in that place, for me it is the smell of shame."

All of this, I was told, can have a corrosive effect upon a young mother. The welfare years were a time of regulatory purgatory. These were years of loneliness and deprivation, years of coping with a tangle of contradictory regulations. And beyond all that, this was a time of stigma, of being cast as "low-lives," the female underclass. The combined hardship and isolation, and the thousands of ways in which they experienced welfare stigma, caused many women to lose heart and then to lose caution. Some became ill with depression. Some reached out for a man just to fill the loneliness, even when they knew better. Some grabbed onto alcohol and drugs to numb everything painful, numbing themselves as well to the pain their children endured. A few hurt their children. Young women on welfare, the grown women said, are "an easy hit." They get stunned from all sides, and from inside too. Poverty, loneliness, and shame can destroy a woman's "second sight," they said, her common sense and caution about men, her devotion to her children, her decent friendships, her "businesslike" behavior, her belief in herself.

"It's like you are all alone in the world and you know maybe it's not a good idea, and maybe you know he's not all that good, but you're all alone. And then next thing you know, you're in it and it may be years before you get yourself out again."

—Nell

I interviewed Nell in 1992, early in this study, and as the years passed her words seemed prophetic. Of the fifty women interviewed between 1990 and 1998 for the Life-History Study, more than half had experienced abuse, violence and/or sexual abuse, from partners over

the course of their child-raising years. Violence included burnings, beatings, knifings, marital rapes, and forced prostitution. Twelve women were involved in substance abuse, their own addictions (three women) or that of men whom they turned to and lived with despite their addiction. "I really didn't have no other place to go," I was told. This was a time, the women recalled, when their children endured three or four, sometimes seven or ten years of life in a place where anxiety and deprivation reigned. A place where access to food, a roof, a winter coat and shoes, a heated home, a quiet night's sleep, a visit to the doctor's office, was not a child's right. For millions of American children, Black, white and Latino children, there is no such thing during these years as bodily safety, nothing is secure. And in most cases their chief advocate is an isolated and vulnerable young mother who is struggling with more than she can manage.

Facing Welfare History Together: Terry and Rona, Roxbury, 1991

Terry and Rona are both in their thirties when we meet at a multi-service program in the Roxbury section of Boston. Both are single mothers of two children and have been on and off welfare during their years of child raising. They suggest that we talk all together, rather than set up several individual interviews because "we already know each other's business." They are very good at drawing each other out, and I find myself sitting back for much of the two interviews, listening to them reconstruct their separate but shared history.

Until her father's death when she was finishing elementary school, Rona lived with her parents and six siblings in a working-class community that she remembers for its flower boxes, large school playgrounds, and well-known neighbors. After her father died, Rona's mother moved with her seven children into an aging public housing development and began working double shifts as a kitchen aide in a local hospital.

Rona says her mother made the wrong decision when she tried to avoid public assistance by working so many hours. Her mother wanted to avoid “going on the dole” at any cost, but Rona thinks that she should have stayed at home with her “pack of kids.” In the housing development, Rona’s brothers began to “run with a group of criminals,” and two of her sisters “started messing with boys when they were still babies.”

Terry interrupts to point out that Rona’s mother was “just trying to do right by her kids,” trying to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads. “You can’t really put her down for that,” Terry says in a voice that tries to guide Rona away from bitterness. But Rona remembers that she and her siblings were dealing with every kind of danger and temptation, with no adult guidance. She was suffering, she says, and her mother should have noticed and stayed home. Yes, Terry agrees, but Rona’s mother was just trying, “like you and I have been trying and we don’t always do everything right.” Rona looks down. “I did nothing right,” she mutters. Terry intervenes forcefully this time, “Now, don’t start that, Rona, you know that’s gonna bring you down.”

By the time that Rona was eighteen years old she was living alone in a small, “nasty” apartment with a two-year-old daughter. The father of her child was still “coming around” once in a while but offered very little help. She spent a year living in a “drug-filled” building, scared and isolated. She seldom left the tiny apartment and she started daydreaming about suicide. “I think I might have done it only there was little Nicole following me around. She was already worrying about me.” Terry pats Rona’s arm in sympathy.

When there was a shooting death right next door, Rona fled her apartment for the next one she could find. On moving day she met Kabrel, the father of her son. “There I was, a baby hanging off my arm and this man came along,” she says ruefully. Rona was carrying boxes up the three flights of stairs with Nicole clinging to her pants when Kabrel appeared. “He seemed like an angel to me. He scooped up

Nicole and a box of my stuff and carried them up. He helped me with all my stuff.” Kabrel, the angel on the stairs, turned out to be something very different. He sent Rona to the hospital several times with lacerations and broken bones, violently abusing her even when she was pregnant with his son. When he started whipping Nicole with a cord, Rona packed up her two babies and nothing else and fled to a battered women’s shelter. Eight years later, she is still trying to patch together some security, a chance to raise her children in safety.

Rona believes that her loneliness, poverty, and despair nearly extinguished her ability to fight against abuse. She was so reduced that she allowed her daughter, at least for a time, to be abused, until finally she found the strength to get out. “Where I came from,” she tells Terry and me, “was poor and so I stayed poor, stayed with others who are poor. And that can make a woman lose her second sense, you know, her sense about her self. She gets used to being with a man who abuses her, she gets used to abuse. And then, don’t you know, she teaches her daughter to do the same . . . what else does the child know?”

Terry quietly listens while Rona explains how she came to tolerate abuse. She takes a deep breath when Rona falls silent, waiting a few moments before letting loose with her own story. A fast talker, she tells a story that is similar to Rona’s in some ways. Like Rona, Terry became detached from her birth family at an early age. Terry’s mother remarried when Terry was fifteen, and her stepfather increasingly behaved toward her “not like a father should.” She recalls feeling as though her mother was both jealous of the inappropriate attention her stepfather gave her and also worried about it, torn between treating her adolescent daughter as someone to protect or as a competitor. Convinced that her stepfather was sexually harassing her, and that her mother wanted her to leave, Terry began staying out late, “messing around with drugs and alcohol,” and doing very poorly in school. Her mother sent her to live with her father’s mother for the summer. Her father’s family was cold to Terry, critical and disrespectful, and Terry felt they wanted

nothing to do with her. She took off in the middle of that summer and didn't return to her mother's house until her stepfather moved out eight years later, "when my ma realized he was starting up with my little sister." Rona shakes her head in sympathy.

Terry spent the next ten years of her life living by her wits, waiting on tables, and doing drugs. When she realized she was pregnant, she tried to curb her addictions. The idea that the baby might arrive sick and addicted appalled her. "I had sunk down pretty low by then," she tells us. "I had sold myself on the street, I was living with a man who beat the hell out of me if I didn't come home with enough cash for his habit." Rona puts her hand on Terry's arm and asks, "Do you really need to tell about all that stuff again? I can never sleep at night after hearing about it," she explains to me. Terry admits that she used talking it out, over and over again, as part of her therapy. "But, I'm getting past it," she says. "I don't have to do that now." I feel a shiver of relief, which Rona notices. "You're a wimp, too," she says with a grin.

While she was pregnant, Terry gave up smoking and drinking and managed a drastic reduction in her drug addiction. Going into delivery, she feared that her baby daughter would have some traces of cocaine in her, despite Terry's effort to avoid the drug. But the baby, astonishingly, was over six pounds, healthy, and "she immediately wanted to suck, like right away, which the nurses told me was a good sign."

Terry still hadn't left her abusive partner, even though he beat her into premature labor and "tore my stitches after I got home." The catalyst for that break came one year later, when child protective services threatened to take Amelia away. Terry went on AFDC and tried hard to care for Amelia. "Yeah, it was very depressing," she says, "but after what I had been through, I was glad it [welfare] was there. I had nowhere else to go." She plunged into every kind of therapeutic group she could join and now goes to battered women's peer-support meetings on Monday, Narcotics Anonymous on Tuesdays and Thursdays,

and serves food at the neighborhood shelter on Fridays. "That's a night I stay really busy," she says with enthusiasm. She attends more support group meetings on the weekends. Everywhere she's gone, Terry says, she's taken Amelia with her, "first in a basket, then in a stroller, and now holding her hand." Terry believes that she needed help as a girl, as a teen, and as a young mother. She claims fears and addiction as her own demons, but she believes also that "I could have been helped before. I mean, once I got help, I ran to it, you know? I could have been helped years before that."

We sit quietly for a few minutes after Terry finishes talking, each of us looking off somewhere, beyond the park benches and trees in bloom and the narrow Boston streets that surround the small square park. It is a beautiful spring day.

I ask Terry and Rona how it is for teens and young women now who have children and no help. Terry, the "motor mouth," takes off. She believes the heart of the battle is education. And she believes that education is reserved for the middle-class. Instead of being educated, she asserts, the lower classes are trained. "We do training programs, like 'sit up, dress right, be good,' but not education. We don't educate girls, to go to college, to think about *being somebody* in the world and not just being with some man."

Currently, Terry and Rona are both attending college. Terry says the experience is "like a light bulb went off, like I *see it* now." "They" don't want others to get this perspective, Terry says heatedly, to recognize that there is no justice in the American system of education, in the labor market, in welfare policy. Rona, who has been listening to her friend and nodding in agreement, gently puts her hand over Terry's mouth. Terry, looking sheepish, subsides into silence. After a pause Rona says, "That's why Black people have been about education from the beginning. That's why they never wanted us to read. When you read, you know, and after, you know, that's when you *do*."

Terry bursts out laughing and turns to me. "See, she tells it in one

sentence and me I go on and on.” Then, she’s off and talking again. Lots of white and Hispanic women need an education too, she reminds us. “Poor is poor, it’s not a color,” she says with conviction. Rona nods in agreement.

The Early Years Were the Hardest: Tania, Dorchester, 1990

Tania calls me to say that she has heard I am looking for women to interview, women who, as she puts it, “have done hard time on welfare.” She’d like to participate. I meet her, an African American woman in her mid-thirties, her two adolescent sons, and two young “god-children” in a large park.

I can see that Tania is surprised when I arrive carrying my youngest daughter, who is only a few months old. Not surprised that I bring a child, of course, considering that she has two in tow, but surprised that my daughter is so young. Tania and I are both well into our thirties, and in her carefully phrased opinion, we are a “little too tired for giving milk.” Still, she is charmed by Clara’s sloppy baby grins. Tania’s two little god-daughters, Jasmine and Tayisha, sit beside me, gently trading Clara back and forth, singing to her and discussing her attributes.

Tania comes from a family of twelve children. Her mother left her father in the South and migrated to Boston with their seven children, Tania among them. With her second marriage, Tania’s mother gave birth to the five younger children.

“We were pretty poor,” Tania remembers, “but in most ways we didn’t know it.” Finding a place to live and keeping food on the table was very hard with so many children. Her large family lived through a gutting fire, several evictions, and serious illnesses. Tania and her siblings had a difficult time keeping up in school. “We were from the backwoods of the South, and we had that ‘country’ accent, and we wore shabby clothes. But my sisters and me were best friends, and most of the time I didn’t feel bad.” Tania and her sister, who was only one year

older, stuck close together, worked hard to keep up, and found support from a wonderful teacher, Miss Jones, who went out of her way to help her students. "When my sister asked to be held back so we could be in the same class, Miss Jones went along with it. But when we asked her to hold us back again so we could stay in her class, she said no. We would have stayed there forever, she was so nice to us."

Tayisha, the older of the two little girls, interrupts Tania. "Scuse me," she says with a solemn expression, "but this baby needs her other blanket 'cause we think she's going to catch cold." One little girl holds Clara's fingers, the other is touching her nose. "It's the best way to tell if a baby is cold," they tell me. I smile at Tania as I fish out Clara's other blanket and hand it over to the girls. Tania watches them with pride, as they tenderly wrap my daughter in the second blanket.

There was seldom enough food or shoes or beds to go around in Tania's childhood home. Miss Jones came by the apartment one time to speak with Tania's mother. She asked permission to give the girls each a new dress and sneakers. Tania smoothes out her skirt and turns her face away, recalling this astonishing kindness twenty-five years later. "I didn't know so many white people then, you know," she says, turning back to me. "But she helped me know that they can act like us, they can have strong feelings."

Tania's older siblings left home, some with hope in their hearts, and some came back beaten down. Before the babies of this family were all grown, more babies came home in the arms of dispirited young parents. "There weren't any jobs for people who sounded like us," she says. "The older boys had very little education."

Tania's mother was always the center of the family. Throughout her life, she relentlessly worked to "keep us having hope to believe that we could get to be somebody. We worshiped her." Tania explains that she was never a follower but, like her mother, a leader. Only *she* had no intention of having all those children. Tania and her sister worked hard to catch up in school, and pretty soon they were "pulling A's and B's."

But her grades never led Tania to think she would go to college. Instead, she entered a trade school in Boston, one of the first of five females who ever attended the school. It was strange, she says, to be among so many boys all the time, but having lots of brothers and not being “a sissy” helped her out. Her sister, who also entered the school, “got into some men troubles and dropped out.” But Tania finished the program, the only girl in her class to do so. She is still very proud to recall this achievement, not so much because of the skills she gained, which as it turned out did her little good, but because she saw it through.

Tania met Peter, the Jamaican father of her children, when he was attending a community college near Tania’s trade school. Peter’s family was not charmed by his growing relationship with an African American woman. She explains, “You know racism isn’t only the way of white people, we all have our own ways too. The people from the islands look down on Black people here, like, you’ve been here all this while, why haven’t you done better?”

Tania had a baby when she was nineteen. While Tania’s mother “never ran out of love for us,” she was, nonetheless, completely overwhelmed by the poverty which had swept into another generation of her family. After Tania’s son was born, she faced the welfare office alone for the first time. “My mother finally convinced me to go ’cause she knew that I would put it off forever, and Peter’s parents would make sure there was food for the baby but I could starve to death. So she dragged me down, and they started their questions and more questions . . . they wanted to know where my moles are.” Their questions, she recalls, were that intimate. “They thought nothing of me as a person, a good student and someone who didn’t hang out or get high. I just needed some help because I had a baby and we had no money. But they treated me like a garbage can.”

Tania had just gone back to work when she realized she was again pregnant. She had been relying on Peter’s family to care for her two-year-old son, but when they heard another baby was on the way, they

told Tania she would have to go. Peter, who had increasingly regarded Tania as an obstacle to his future prospects, became cold and abusive. One night, after hours of fighting with Peter, she went into preterm labor. Peter moved to California while she was still in the hospital. Tania moved into a one-bedroom apartment in a public housing complex with Tyler, her eldest, and her newborn baby and went back on welfare.

“I went into a deep depression,” Tania says. “Maybe I thought that Peter would love me again, the way he had when I was carrying Tyler. Then I knew it was hopeless, that he thought he could never get ahead with me and another baby just meant more burden. I lay in bed for five months crying. I wouldn't contact anyone, not even my family. My son watched me cry all day long.” Tania's sister, mother, and mother-in-law helped out when they could, but Tania felt truly alone. She remembers the time as the worst part of her life, caring for a newborn and a distressed three-year-old in a tiny place that steamed in the summer and froze in the winter.

When Marcus, her second son, turned two, Tania says, “I got over that man and I realized it was all up to me. I had two beautiful boys and my own determination, and that's all that kept me from falling apart. But remember, I spent months in bed crying, wheezing with asthma that I never got before or since. Tyler still calls them my ‘crying times.’”

Descriptions of deep depression, like this, were often a part of these women's accounts of their welfare years. What they describe is not only sadness associated with losses which tend to mount up during this period, but the slow-moving, sick-at-heart depression which can transform a person. Tania had a lot of company, I discovered over the years. Polly, for example, told me, “I longed for night because then I could drink and get numb.” The anesthesia of alcohol would disguise despair for Polly for awhile, but she still cries when she thinks of her children watching her drink at night. Rona recalled, more than anything, the

worried face of her little daughter who “tried to make little jokes for me so’s I’d maybe laugh that day—‘I be funny for you, Momma,’ she’d say.” Tania too feels guilty about the misery her sons were born into. She understands how she arrived at such a depressing place, but she won’t forgive herself for the suffering of her children. She is still shocked at the woman she became, if only for a few years. “Those were important years,” she says, grieving aloud. “They were the first years of my sons’ lives.”

Quick Notes

“He would hold my head as I cried. I would tell him, ‘It’s OK baby, go to sleep. Mama’s OK.’ But he stopped sleeping well. It was like he knew I was thinking of ending it all.”

—Tania, 1990

“I would cry all the way to the welfare office and my daughter would cry with me. Once inside, I never cried, never smiled, never said nothing I didn’t have to. And you know, I think she saw that too ’cause she would go all quiet with me. . . . How did I feel? Like a stone. We were two stones, a big one and a little one.”

—Renata, 1992

“I lost control, I went crazy that night. I took the pillow and I covered her face [she pushes off her sister’s comforting hand from her arm]. YES, I DID, I DID . . . Then I took it off and then I did it again. Then I said to myself, ‘Jackie, you’re killing Kenata, your baby, you’re killing her.’ I ran to the phone and I called DSS [state child protective service] and I reported myself.”

—Jackie, 1990

“I hear someone keening in the hallway, a high-pitched crazy sound. Carmen and I stop short in our conversation and quickly walk out into the hall of this busy child-care center where we see Elba, her

arms around a struggling woman. Elba is speaking a rapid stream of Spanish to the wailing woman, rubbing her arms, and Carmen, hearing what she says, seems to collapse. She tells me that Theresa, the woman who weeps, is learning of her sister's death, a sister who has three small children. This sister has been depressed for several years and wasn't able to endure some recent misfortunes. She recently lost her husband and also had to face the new welfare policy in Massachusetts, which takes no prisoners. She'd been notified that she was being cut off of AFDC and had to find a community service job or employment. This woman, Theresa's younger sister, had committed suicide the evening before.

"It is a sickening blow that everybody seems to feel, a feeling of loss that moves throughout the building. Adults and even children seem subdued by the news, speaking quietly of people they know who are so similar to this young mother, people close at hand, some here right now.

"Over the weeks that follow her sister's death, Theresa tries to figure out how she might keep her sister's children, bring them into her own family. But she has three children of her own and a marriage already strained, so her sister's children go into foster care. I watch from afar over the next few months, not about to say more than the simple words of condolence because I do not know Theresa. I see her walking the halls more slowly now. She doesn't look you in the eye. Her face seems frozen."

—In *Jamaica Plain*, 1996

There's No One Else to Blame: MaryBeth, Boston, 1993

I meet MaryBeth while conducting a research project in a community-based family program in the South End of Boston in 1993. MB, as she is called, is a social worker, focused on children of young mothers on welfare. She spends her days referring mothers to the frayed web of services which still exist at that time. She tries to place children in low-cost

child-care programs. She encourages battered women to go to sheltering programs. She gets tough with drinking and drug-taking parents. She watches hardship pour in the office door from nine in the morning until late at night. MB sees the very worst of what goes on when parents despair in America, and above all MB watches the children. She is very discouraged on the day we meet for an interview.

“You see kids come in [to the child care center] and you know they are crazed. They’ve come from a no-sleep night in a crowded apartment and you already know that family is in crisis, the mother is holding on by a thread. And these kids are supposed to sit still and say ‘bye-bye’ to mommy [as she goes out to handle housing, welfare, and job training problems] and they really don’t know if she is going to make it back.”

MB has seen babies lose weight and lose heart. She has watched depression set in, a particularly savage process in tiny children, stunting little bodies and young minds. And she has seen rage too, toddlers trying to beat on babies and babies bruised and “who the hell knows how it happened.” MB is full of vitality and outrage, but also vulnerable, and she is unable to stop her tears as she recalls the faces she has seen. As she speaks she grows more and more angry, expressing contempt for inadequate mothers, absent fathers, family madness. Mothers particularly anger MB because, well, who else is there? And those mothers who scream at their kids, scream curses at them, who hit them. MB is barely controlling her fury as the old stories come spilling out.

I ask MB if she is a mother and she nods hard, yes, of three young children. She works and she gets tired, but she doesn’t lose control. She has a husband who agrees with her that hitting children is wrong. They had to explain this “no corporal punishment” to MB’s mother, who watches her grandchildren some afternoons. Even with her master’s degree in social work, her husband’s salary as a postal worker, and her mother’s ready availability, MB and her husband must struggle to stay in a place that is safe and has decent schools, and to stay positive. Gen-

tly, I prod MB with a question. How would it have been if she had had those babies young, alone, with no man, no mother, no safety, no respect, and lots of troubles? MB, no fool, sees where this line of reflection leads. She does not know how she would cope with what these mothers face, she says, "but I get to the point where I can't take it and there is no one else to blame." I ask whether it is easier, and cheaper too, to blame parents. Maybe that's how we wash our hands of the pain. MB looks out of the window of her crowded little office. "Maybe I'm just at the end of my rope, you know. Burnt to a crisp. Maybe you can only do this for just so long," she says wearily.

ABUSE AMONG THE REGULATORS

In the course of listening to many accounts of women dealing with the welfare system, I came upon an experience for which I had no immediate terminology. This experience rose out of women's accounts of abuse, almost always committed by men, but not boyfriends, husbands, nor even strangers. I have termed this experience "abuse among the regulators." It is an abusive dynamic set within a distinct relationship, the relationship between one who has power and is male, and one who does not and is female. It occurred between a woman who approaches public institutions because she is poor and a man who is the institutional official. It happened between a woman who is in public housing and the building manager who repairs her apartment. It tainted the relationship between a woman and her male caseworker at the welfare office; between a woman in a mandated job training program and her instructor, who will pass or fail her; and between a woman and her drug counselor, who will say she is staying sober or she is not. It even emerged between a mother and the driver of a van who took her children to a publicly funded children's program each afternoon.

Over the years women mentioned counselors, caseworkers, build-

ing managers, and other men with particular power conferred upon them by public offices who had used their position to sexually exploit and abuse the women. These stories of “regulatory abusers” caught me off guard. More than two-thirds of the Life-History interviews were complete before I recognized a pattern in these casually described experiences. When I began to ask systematically about this harassment and exploitation, the data which emerged was as profound to me as it was unremarkable to many of the women I questioned. Most men, they counseled me, attempt to extract sex from women over whom they have power, as long as they can get away with it. It was the way of the world. “*I mean, come on Lisa, where have you been?*” Close by, I thought to myself, close enough to have seen this before.

Twenty-four-year-old Janet entered a job training program through the welfare office. While she loved the outdoors and wanted to do something active, she was sent to a computer training class. The vocational instructor found her attractive.

“He wasn’t bad at first, you know, compliments and all that, but I knew what was coming.” Janet needed to maintain her welfare and subsidized child-care status through successful progress in the program. “You know, I put him off with a little of this and that, I kind of went along with some of the rubbing and all that. He started to hit on some of the other girls, I kept out of sight.” But did she tell anyone? “Tell who, what for?” Janet asked me disinterestedly.

Maria, twenty-eight, was propositioned by a landlord in her publicly subsidized apartment. He told her he would fix the windows and other basic repairs “for sex.” Her cousin’s husband made the repairs instead, in exchange for child care which Maria provided. But sometimes she would let this landlord fondle her to get him to do the most basic kinds of upkeep. The worst was when her son would see it occur. Her son knew that she hated this landlord and yet there he was, stroking Mommy’s arm.

Rona, who is almost thirty, says that the building manager in her

apartment complex told her he would give her a better unit if she “delivered.” Despite holes in the walls and the decay around her, she chose to stay put.

Tabitha, who is in her twenties, had a welfare worker who was a source of torment to her. She was called in for frequent “case reviews,” a process which reassessed her eligibility for aid. At those meetings, “all he would ask about was my sex life, like, had I had any after my son was born? He wanted details and details of what my boyfriend did, what I did, how it felt, like that.” Tabitha’s aunt eventually confronted this welfare voyeur, but he remained in his job and Tabitha was passed on to another caseworker.

Tracy, in her early thirties, was referred to a drug rehabilitation program as part of a process to reclaim custody of her daughter. If she did not “pass” the program, she would lose parental rights. Her counselor in the drug program told Tracy that sex was required to pass. “Look, to the world I was nothing but a coke-whore. Now I had not had any kind of substance for months and I was trying my best. He made it simple, I was to give him what he wanted or he would report me out bad. Who would believe me anyway, come on. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to get my daughter back . . . nothing.”

Dianne was in her late twenties when a fire destroyed her apartment, and she and her children had to live in a “welfare motel” for several months. It was a place where the conditions were never monitored, Dianne says, where children are shut up and “mothers are bouncing off the walls.” They lived in one small room, with a cacophony of sounds day and night; screaming, crying, sometimes a sad voice singing. According to Dianne, men would come to the motel at night looking for sex. She would hear truck drivers drive into the parking lot at night and they would start banging on the doors. “You know, we’re homeless, on welfare, we’re whores right?” One night she saw two men dragging a young girl out of her room, she was screaming for help. “I ran down

to the guy at the front desk and yelled at him to call the police. He told me to shut up or he'd say I was a troublemaker. I found out they gave him money to look away." Dianne stares out of the stained glass window of the church where we meet that day. "God knows what happened to that poor girl."

When I asked other women and adolescent girls if they knew of these kinds of incidents, many just shrugged. It happens, they told me again and again. It happens all the time when girls are out there, with no one to help out, and no one who's going to believe you. Some people can withstand it, hold out, they explained, and some may have too much at stake. Or they just don't have the strength left. And then, "they kind of believe you ask for it anyway." It's part of the welfare culture, they explained to me.

There has been some work, local to Massachusetts, undertaken to expose and analyze the "lawlessness" of welfare institutions. Vickie Steinitz has considered welfare reform in the context of international standards of human rights violations, and she argues that there is a "dismal picture of abuses and injustices by the state on vulnerable women who are struggling to provide for themselves and their children under very difficult circumstances."¹ An overt effort to reduce the number of families who receive assistance, accelerated in those states which boast harsh welfare-reform policy, provides a cultural backdrop for all kinds of "lawless" behavior. Such a culture may give rise to a lack of restraint among officials in their treatment of women, the essential condition in which sexual abuse thrives.²

I often found it difficult to get responses from women when I first asked them to analyze this data on regulatory abuse, even from women who reported such incidents had occurred in their own lives. This difficulty perhaps reflects the common social habit of silence about experiences of abuse. Yet I also found it was relatively easy to break the silence if I suggested that the abuses I had uncovered were

unusual—if I suggested they were trivial or invalid. Suddenly, I was offered more evidence, more stories, more suggestions of where to look for such abuses. A woman from El Salvador, for example, suggested we look at what happens to women who cross the border from Mexico into the states. A young white woman referred to “getting messed with” when a girl has cop trouble, that some police will take sexual advantage of a woman. Or guess what happens to girls in foster care, queried another, one who had been there. Or women with prison records looking for work, or women who are homeless, or girls in youth services programs run by men, or even, nowadays, women who have to do mandatory community-service work with men bosses. What do you think happens, they asked, to a woman who is here illegally when the boss she works for under-the-table wants more than his kitchen cleaned. Or when the landlord comes for the rent and you don't have it all. And so on.

Numerous women offered suggestions about where to go, who to watch, and how to recognize what they would then matter-of-factly sum up as “just the way it is.” “This is not something a woman wants to speak about, you know, it brings shame,” I was told. Most women reflected this kind of hard acceptance, and very few asserted that the shame should be placed elsewhere. Some did, however. A few older women suggested there is a collective history of women and girls in poor America and that this history includes degradation through sexual harassment and abuse. Several African American women regarded welfare abuse as the latter-day version of slavery culture. Women slaves, they said, “had no rights, just like welfare.” A few women who have become involved in women's rights work suggested that wherever power is particularly unbalanced, there is covert license to abuse those with the least of it, “and who's got less power than some girl on welfare?”³

BREAKING THE RULES

In their stories of their welfare years, women not only detailed ways in which the system worked to increase their troubles—the long waits, senseless regulations, incompetent officials, and shaming environment—and the sexually abusive violations of authority by some male regulators, they also described to me ways that they have learned to resist inhumane rules. There are, they said, as many ways to break the rules as there are impossible circumstances to live under.

My cousin bakes cakes for parties, one woman told me. My sister has helped teach English to family members, said a Puerto Rican woman. I heard about cleaners, caterers, school-lunch monitors, and hairdressers, all part-time and all off the books. How much money does this come to, I asked. It comes to a pair sneakers for my children when they go back to school, something which makes them feel a little better about another year. It comes to a “coming-out dress” for my fifteen-year-old, said another, the only party she has ever had. It comes to a large Christmas dinner for my family, my grandparents and aunts and uncles who have fed me and mine too many times to recall. And what about what we read in the paper, I made myself ask. Like what about buying drugs, drink, handing money over to boyfriends to use for what not. Sure, some women do that, I was told, some who are addicted to substances and to a man. But most women search the underground for ways to make some cash because the income of welfare is not enough to care for the people you love, not nearly.

I came to think of this as an “outlaw” analysis, a stepping outside of laws which no one can abide. It can be shaky ground, older women acknowledged, because while you do your business to survive, you must hold onto a sense of right and wrong, and teach that to your children. Sometimes, some people can lose their bearings and then they turn into people they don’t want to be. It can be hard to hold onto your own ethical code, after years of hardship and no exit.

These “outlaw” strategies seemed to contradict what many women had told me, that you acquiesce to regulatory authority whenever possible, saving up your strength and anger. They had counseled passing through the various agencies unnoticed and impassive, just as Renata had described it, *being stones*. But I learned that complex strategies are required, and that you choose those best suited to the struggle. Sometimes when the rules contradict each other and pile up in incomprehensible ways, it becomes necessary to subvert them, to go around them. Sometimes when welfare officials tell you, this is all the money you have to eat and pay bills, and you know *and that official knows as well as you do* that one cannot survive on that amount, well something must be done. And then a duel begins, one which necessitates prevarication, duplicity, playacting, risk taking. It is risky. It is an old conflict which adjusts and evolves with the turn of many screws. To stay healthy in this culture, one must hold on tight to what you know, to the way you have been brought along, to what is necessary to deal with this world.

I asked people who sit on the other side of the desk—social workers in community health centers, staff in jobs programs for low-income women, day-care center teachers who serve families under certain income levels if they had an analysis of this same gambit. These points of reference stretch well beyond the core welfare program, AFDC, but they are closely allied. Some people bluntly agreed, the rules do not add up. Whether they were sympathetic or not, they saw that duplicity, creative accounting, and vague, unaccountable answers to regulatory questions were an adaptive survival technique.

Luscious, Boston, 1993

“We all be creative with our accounts you know, just like the man.”

Luscious was born in Boston twenty years ago, the fifth of six children. Her family comes from Jamaica. When Luscious was five, her mother

had a stroke which left her unable to speak clearly or walk without a cane. Neither the baby of the family nor yet old enough to negotiate her own place in the scramble that followed her mother's illness, Luscious felt lost.

Luscious recalls other experiences which shaped her childhood. Her family was a religious one, but Luscious remembers rejecting religion at the age of six: "If God could do like he did to my mother, then we have nothing to talk about." She remembers her father's mother as someone who seemed to recognize that Luscious was adrift and so "became my guardian angel." She also recalls with great tenderness one girlfriend who remained very close throughout her girlhood, "like a sister, you know, like you take her side no matter what." She speaks of having been raped as a young girl by several men who came into a house where she was baby-sitting one night. Luscious believes that the owner of the house, a member of her church, had told these men—one was his brother—that she was all alone. Her family never filed charges against the men. They were so shocked and shamed by the incident that they did not want it to become public.

"But my granny did something back to them," Luscious adds. What was that? She carefully eyes me and then, in an authoritative tone that is surely a perfect replication of her grandmother's voice, says it can't be discussed. After a moment, I move on to a different subject, but Luscious interrupts with a whisper: "They all got pretty sick, really sick. My grandmother knows about spirits."

Luscious had a baby at the age of seventeen, a few months after she graduated from high school. Her child's father left for the army two months before the baby was born. Like Polly and Arlette, Luscious was ejected from the family before she became a mother, but *she* landed in the arms of her granny. "I knew she would be there for me so it wasn't as bad as it would have been . . . but without my guardian angel, who knows what would have happened to me?"

Her grandmother's affection was a great support to Luscious, espe-

cially when she found that dealing with the welfare office was an exercise in humiliation. She had agreed with her child's father, given his family's kindness and periodic financial help, not to reveal his name to welfare officials. Her "in-laws" were very supportive of Luscious and provided child care which was dependable and safe. "If I'd of told on Lennie," Luscious says, "he would have been in trouble and then it would have ruined everything." Her grandmother disliked the lie but advised her to stick with it. This meant saying that "I didn't know who the father was . . . like I was so loose I didn't know who I'd had sex with." This deceit was antithetical to everything Luscious had been raised to believe and value. It meant accepting the most disrespectful label a woman can have.

Luscious said the walk to the welfare office was like a long march. "I would cry all the way there and all the way back." They required identifications, birth certificates, information about her parents' status and income. When she told them that her parents "don't have anything to do with me," they told her "too bad, call them up and get the information." Finally, her grandmother went to the welfare office and made the caseworker call Luscious's father. When he harangued his daughter as a whore and the caseworker as the devil's assistant, they were finally persuaded that Luscious would receive no help from that quarter. She says that she never received any hopeful encouragement or guidance from welfare officials, that the whole exchange was based upon the idea "that I was some loose girl, that I wanted to be some single mother with nothing but their dirty money. I wish bad things on them," she tells me in a low voice.

And how does a woman survive on welfare, I ask Luscious. She tells me what women have told me for twenty years, ever since I first listened to them talking in the Charlestown candy factory. No one survives on welfare alone, even if you live with your grandmother. Everybody has other sources: supports, trades, barterers. Sometimes you get

hooked up with questionable people when you make your underground deals. Like drugs? I ask Luscious, because that is what I am asked so often. Maybe, she says, but anything you do off-the-books means you have crossed the line. You are into the cheater territory. If you're on welfare and your grandmother is teaching you to give counsel to people to rid spirits which plague them, and you charge for this service, you're cheating. If you provide child care for a fee for friends who are working several nights a week, and you don't report the income, you are a lawbreaker. "Or like, if you use your nephew's Medicaid card [for your own child] 'cause you don't have one yet, 'cause they won't process your papers until you get some paper, but no one can tell you how or where to do it . . . well . . . that's cheating."

One social worker whom I asked about welfare survival strategies, Anne, offered this analysis. The culture of requisite prevarication, she said, is part of a backdrop which gives rise to the whole "dysfunctional affect" which labels so many poor women. This affect, she explained, is the kind of no-response, shutdown behavior that is typical of many women on welfare. Like stones, I offered, and she approved of the image.

Anne recalled for me a story from when she was a younger and deeply engaged social worker. She worked with a young white woman for over an hour; cajoling, encouraging, and informing her about what was needed to get her son into a special-needs program and receive the benefits involved. Eventually, she all but filled out the forms for the blank-faced, friendly young woman who shoved them into her bag and said, "OK, bye now." Anne, convinced the woman was retarded, wondered if the lethargic three-year-old who was drinking coke out of a baby bottle would ever have a chance.

After work, Anne went out for pizza. While waiting in line, she listened in on an animated conversation between some young women,

and turning to look, she recognized the “slow” client from earlier in the day. The young woman was bouncing her baby on her lap and laughing with two friends, talking about the preschool program her son would attend. “She was saying something like, ‘If you act *really* dumb, they figure you really need the help and they *see* those forms are in proper order.’” The woman’s baby was now drinking milk with a straw.

I asked Anne if she felt angry about the charade. Anne was a “little pissed off,” she says, but really more embarrassed. She pushed herself, though, to consider what was at stake for this woman who had used what tools she had to cope with a situation in which she had no say. Anne thinks this woman handled the situation pretty well. “I mean, if you think about it, she wanted that kid in that program. She knew that *I’d get all the answers* straight and that I’d think he needed it with that kind of mom. What’s at stake for her? If her kid gets in the school, so what if I think she’s an idiot. He did real good in the special program too,” she adds softly.

Over the years, Anne says, she began to collaborate with her clients, first in an obtuse way but finally, systematically. “I tell them when to say ‘I don’t know,’ what to ask for, and how to get the most out of it. I use my body language. Like when they answer something wrong—*maybe honestly*, but wrong to get the service—I kind of wince or make a face, and they get it. I mean they’re not dumb, you know, they’re poor.”

And what does that make you? I ask Anne. She looks me in the eye when she answers, “A social worker.”

Anne believes that, if you do social work, you eventually have to make a choice. You can learn to see the worst in people, and then to identify deeply with the institutional mandates which express social stigma. Or you begin to see the world standing in another woman’s shoes. If you do, you start to think differently about what is right. You start to think, if I was there and that was my baby, what *wouldn’t I do* to get over the blockades. When you start to think in this way, she says,

your whole perspective starts to change and then you may find you do things differently.

When I opened the subject of breaking the rules with a group of “welfare survivors,” various voices conveyed the same message: breaking the rules is necessary because the rules are destructive to your family. “We all be creative with our accounts,” Luscious explained to me. “You know, just like the man.” When I asked her to elaborate, she smiled and shrugged, but egged on by others she explained that other folks, educated wealthy people, are all the time creative in their accounts. She thinks that if it is good for them, well maybe it is OK for a woman trying to survive in low-income America.

Nemesis offered another name for this creative accounting. She called it civil disobedience, disobeying rules that treat you and your children as having no value. Haven’t women *always* disobeyed such rules and wouldn’t any righteous mother do so, she challenged the other women. The law is not always right, she said, and then it is right to disobey. Nemesis came to this understanding through the teachings of her mother and other family members and has since had it confirmed in college courses. She told the group that Black people have historically refused to collaborate with laws which diminished them, that made them collaborate in their own oppression. The other women in the group were a little startled by Nemesis’s view, but also intrigued.

Veronica could not agree more. “You’re a welfare cheat, right? If you just do the things anyone would do to keep your kids OK,” she said. “*They make you into what they can get you for.*” There is method to all this, she said. The welfare system corners you into postures which require outlaw behavior just to survive, but then you are labeled as criminal. Luscious concurred: “I say this [snaps her fingers] to the law. You’re breaking the law by making sure you and your kids don’t starve on the street—well, that’s not *my* law.”

These women see the welfare system as somebody else’s law, rules that work for others, but not for the women and children who live in

the world of poor America. And so, if you believe you have the right to survive and that your children have the right to grow up and have a place in the world, you start to see and do things differently. You break their rules.

WAYS OF KNOWING THE WELFARE CULTURE

The women who spoke with me about their welfare years reflected the broad range of that experience. Some stayed on welfare for only a short time, some for four or five years, and some had been using AFDC to “get by” for over a decade. They were diverse in other significant ways: racially and ethnically diverse, very young to middle-aged, Boston-born or from the South or from islands far away. Some had left welfare and poverty behind, some had not. Their level of education was correlated to their economic status: some had graduated from a post-secondary school (most often from community colleges), a few older women were in graduate programs, and others were still working on their high school diplomas. All but two young women had employment histories, and most of the participants over twenty-five had years of paid work behind them. Even so, all of the fifty Life-History participants experienced significant setbacks over the course of their child-raising years. These were setbacks which, in twelve cases, returned an employed woman and her children from relative stability to extreme hardship once again. Some younger women, listening to these frightening histories of moving forward and falling back down, shivered. “It is enough to freeze your blood,” one told me.

These women spoke of a welfare culture from knowledge buried deep inside. But it was not their culture they described. Rather, they spoke of an institutional culture which has gradually crept outside the welfare office and insinuated itself into public schools, health centers, job programs, housing offices, and all the other places where poor women go out and deal with the day-to-day. They spoke of relatives,

neighbors, close friends, and communities which had dealt with the insidious impact of welfare.

These women recalled the wrenching beginnings of going down to the welfare office for the first time, all alone with a baby. They knew the games that go on, the overt regulatory games and the nasty covert ones. They knew about bravado, speaking up loud and proud, at least for a while. And they knew about the daily erosions that can eventually strip your courage as the months pass by. These women spoke of sexual and physical abuse, mental illness, withdrawing into numbness, addictions, the haunting terror of losing children, and the worst feeling of all, that maybe you *should* lose them because you are such trash. Some spoke in teeth-clenched tones, others fought tears from spilling, and a few became absolutely silent.

I heard this as welfare knowledge in your face, insider knowledge which comes from lived experience. It is about a welfare culture which is imposed upon people, not one of their making, one which is despised. But I also heard within these groups of women who have “been there” echoes of the popular beliefs outsiders have about welfare. These women would blame other mothers for the bad name they all must bear. I heard numerous women say, “There are some out there who don’t deserve it, who don’t care for their babies and give all their money to their boyfriends. Or take drugs and neglect their kids.” When I asked these women if they knew anyone intimately who behaved this way, many acknowledged that they did not. Yet they accepted the idea of these “low-life” mothers as prevalent, based on neighborhood talk, newspaper and TV accounts, or the occasional sighting of women who look so shabby and seem to have no pride. Some people who had struggled with poverty and the welfare system sounded remarkably punitive, their remarks were very similar to conservative welfare rhetoric. But only a few women suggested that this behavior was evident in their own families, and when they did, it was with deep disgust. Most often, a sister, mother, or cousin whose history was shared was carefully ex-

amined in the context of that woman's own complicated trials. Sometimes she was described as rising to meet them and other times as falling down.

As most research on women and poverty suggests, the welfare system is loathed by the people who have to live with it.⁴ Almost every woman involved in this research described intricate plans to get away from welfare and to attain a better life for herself and her children. But again and again, the lack of tangible ways to gain control of one's life—the inability to obtain needed schooling for employment, to get safe child care, to meet the daily demands of hard family life—would obstruct even the smallest steps taken to break out of welfare.⁵

Equally difficult as these practical impediments were other powerful obstacles to moving ahead. Women spoke of trying to stifle rage and shame, of trying to face isolation, abuse, and stigma—work which left many of them exhausted and numb. “Trying to take care of babies in this condition is hard, you know? Hard to give them what they need, hard to know you cannot make it all better. Makes a woman weak, sometimes.” Keeping certain kinds of madness at bay is a part of the work of women on welfare.

The emotional well-being of women raising children in low-income America has received attention in the mental health professions, yet this issue is largely absent from the broad welfare debate. Some scholarship that explores the relationship between women's mental health and their experiences of poverty focuses on the limitations of clinicians who cannot grasp the dynamics of life in poor America.⁶ Deborah Belle and her colleagues, who examined depression in poor women, point to causes not only in the external pressures upon families but also in the power of stigma against women receiving public aid. Their work suggests that not only do poor women have many more upheavals than experienced by individuals in the general population, but that they must also contend with the chronic stress of poverty, requiring constant adjustment. These demands are ultimately more eroding than episodic

troubles.⁷ Further, the routine lack of control over one's own life that is experienced by women on welfare, the inadequate or mistaken information rampant in welfare systems, and a universal awareness of the welfare stigma have been documented as contributing to depression and mental illness. One can imagine that such stigma would be hard to ignore. "Women on welfare have been variously characterized as lazy, cheating, promiscuous, dependent, freeloaders, and daughters of mothers of equally poor character."⁸

And as these researchers point out, such conditions can give rise to depression, feelings of hopelessness, and even suicidal behavior. Sixty-six percent of the women in one study experienced a high rate of depressive symptoms, were currently emotionally distressed, and expressed anxiety about the stigma they face,⁹ findings which repeatedly emerged in my own work. In a more recent study, it was found that continued receipt of welfare over time had an undermining effect upon women's self-esteem, contradicting "prevalent stereotypes of women who readily receive a welfare check."¹⁰

"Why do they hate me so much, just for getting on welfare?" one woman asked researchers Ann Withorn and Diane Dijon.¹¹ Why is she such a despised person, she wanted to know, just as Ellen interrogated me, why is this the way our nation treats poor mothers? Withorn goes on to describe the lives of women who spoke to her as being a "series of small Sophie's Choices, a painful, bitter, humiliating juggling act." It is not only material hardship which places women in poor America in such a marginal position. It is the absolute awareness these millions of women *and their children* have that the dominant society regards their hardships to be a reflection of their inferiority.

Many of the discussants recognized strong connections between domestic violence, poverty, and the welfare culture. Some participants considered the acute vulnerability of poor single-motherhood as the cause of some women's acceptance of abuse from men in their lives. They pointed to the exaggerated sense of hopelessness which many bat-

tered women feel when their options for leaving are profoundly limited by poverty and welfare rules. They listed the material obstructions to escaping abuse: no car, no money, no credit card, no place to go but shelters which were often full and sometimes scary. This connection has been validated by recent studies.¹² Leaving any domestic partnership is hard, but it is particularly difficult when leaving is as perilous as staying.

The experiences of living with institutionalized welfare culture cut deep and leave indelible effects. The people who know about the welfare culture are not just individuals who have lived it, but also their families and other kin. In time, whole neighborhoods and communities assimilate such treatment as part of the world of poor America. It becomes class knowledge.

As I learned over the years, the effects of the welfare experience are sometimes a self-loathing which can cause madness of sorts very particular to women under unmitigated stress and stigma. This is one of the ways of knowing the welfare culture. But sometimes these conditions, instead, cause people to turn their gaze outward and then to reframe the terms which govern their lives. Along with others who have undertaken qualitative research with people on welfare, I found that the welfare years are a time when young mothers reframe the terms by breaking the rules to survive and to ensure their children survive.¹³ If you add up even minimal family costs, and then count the dollars that welfare offers, the conclusion is irrefutable. No one keeps a household intact nor children safe by relying solely on welfare, even with the ancillary supports available. This is known almost everywhere in welfare systems, in the offices and hallways where allowances and benefits are meted out and received. The impact of this structurally contrived paradox is that low-income parents caring for children must construct alternative ways of making ends meet. And of course, they do.