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From Personal Responsibility to Perpetual Dependency: An Analysis of the Potential Implications of a Permanent Expansion of the Child Tax Credit on Poverty in America

Abigail J. Klare

University of Cincinnati

Advisor: Dr. Michael Jones, PhD

Kautz-Uible Economics Institute

Carl H. Lindner College of Business

University of Cincinnati

2906 Woodside Drive

Cincinnati, OH 45221-0371



About the Author: Abigail Klare



Abigail Klare is a current student in the M.S. Applied Economics program at the University of Cincinnati. She earned her B.A. in Political Science and B.B.A. in Business Economics from the University of Cincinnati in 2021, graduating summa cum laude and as an Amanda Wait Kautz-Uible Economics Fellow.

Throughout her collegiate years, Abigail has gained professional experience in equity research, corporate litigation, and welfare/family policy research at a leading D.C. policy think tank. She is motivated to integrate her economics skills with a passion for living out her Catholic faith within the realm of family and welfare policy.

Abigail's current research involves an analysis of the potential implications of a permanent expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) on poverty in America.

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Introduction

On March 11, 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Biden Administration signed the American Rescue Plan (ARP) into law. Passed as an emergency relief package for struggling American families and businesses, the ARP contained many provisions that proved to be much more “extreme” than would typically move through a deeply divided Congress. In particular, the Child Tax Credit (CTC) policy was dramatically altered through this legislation and as a result, resembles something very different from a credit tied to one’s personal tax liability. Through this emergency relief legislation that removed pre-existing work requirements and made the credit fully refundable, the CTC has temporarily been transformed into a child allowance.

The modified CTC policy is set to expire at the end of 2021. However, the Biden administration has put forth the various legislation proposals—such as the American Families Plan (AFP)—which would formally codify the change and make the reform of the CTC into a child allowance a permanent one, indefinitely.¹ Rather than providing tax relief to families balancing work with the responsibilities of rearing children, a child allowance is indicative of a significant movement away from a cultural mindset that values personal responsibility and towards one of lasting dependency via universal aid in perpetuity.

Acknowledgment of Overton Window for American Rescue Plan

Before I continue, it is reasonable and necessary to address the fact that one ought to look at future proposals for permanent expansion of the CTC with greater scrutiny than we did the ARP, especially given the reality that the latter was passed as part of emergency relief rather than as structural overhaul as outlined by the former. More specifically, the temporary relief was enacted within a set of circumstances that created an Overton window.

Named for political theorist, Joseph Overton, the Overton Window is the “concept that politicians are limited in what policy ideas they can support — they generally only pursue policies that are widely accepted throughout society as legitimate policy options.”² The possible policy ideas that a politician can support are those that typically will not cost him/her electoral support. In general, this window of possible policy positions evolves slowly and over time, reflective of the gradual way in which societal values and norms change. However, shocks to the environment—such as COVID-19—can dramatically widen the window in a short amount

¹ “Help is Here: The American Rescue Plan Delivers Major Tax Relief for Families with Children,” The White House, June 14, 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/One-Pager_CTC-Major-Tax-Relief_8.5x11_Digital_061421_V4.pdf.

² “A Brief Explanation of the Overton Window,” Mackinac Center for Public Policy, accessed October 14, 2021, <https://www.mackinac.org/overtonwindow>.

of time. Such an environment defines the circumstances in which the ARP was passed. We therefore can't truly consider the ARP and AFP through the same lens of scrutiny because the context and implications of their previous and proposed enactment is entirely different. At the time the ARP was enacted, the United States found itself deeply entrenched in the uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This \$1.9 trillion emergency relief package was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Biden during a time in which unemployment remained relatively high, many schools were operating in a remote learning environment, and vaccines were not yet widely available to the public. Simply put, the whole of government response to provide relief of any kind to the American populace is reflected in the "all-but-the-kitchen-sink" nature of the legislation and the American people were grateful for any help they could get.

In an effort to provide *temporary, emergency* relief and in the context of a global pandemic, matters that would typically elicit greater scrutiny by political opponents and the populace alike were accepted with reasonable ease. This difference in a willingness to accept a policy that would typically be seen as an extreme change be explained by a shift or broadening of the Overton window for policymaking.

Why Should We Care about a Child Allowance Policy?

This proposed shift away from an existing consensus on welfare policy that favors work requirements and reciprocity as part of a social contract for conditional aid, towards one of universal cash handouts without structures of reciprocity, has the potential to affect more than just material poverty in the U.S. The nature of this drastic change in policy would propel the U.S. towards a way of life marked by dependence, rather than self-provision. As a result, this movement towards dependency, while potentially offering slight upside in the short-term reduction of material poverty, will likely lead to an increase in another kind of poverty: social poverty—a state of lacking connection to community and participation, something to which all human persons are called.

Consensus remains unclear among U.S. policymakers debating the merits of such reform on our social and welfare state. In fact, while partisan divide over the issue exists, there is a reasonable margin of overlap between more moderate Democrats and Republicans, namely Senators Joe Manchin (WV) and Mitt Romney (UT), respectively. Disagreements are many as to how best to affect reform and expansion of the CTC; however, as detailed more extensively in the subsequent sections, Manchin's reservations and Romney's interest—by way of a competing proposal—on the matter point to more deeply rooted questions of our worldview on the relationship between family, community, and government.

In order to evaluate the proposed policy changes, I will first look to the history of modern welfare policy in the U.S. and its efficacy in decreasing material poverty as a result of reform to a system of cash benefit transfers without work requirements, Aid to Dependent Families with Children (AFDC), to a system that is tied to work requirements, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

History of U.S. Welfare Policy

On August 22, 1996, Democratic president Bill Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, a massive proposal to reform welfare policy in the U.S. that was built on overwhelming bipartisan consensus in Congress. Running on the campaign promise to “End Welfare as We Know It,” enacting this reform was a core tenet of President Clinton’s agenda in the White House. Additionally, Republicans, under the leadership of Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, were also motivated to overhaul the U.S. welfare state in favor of something that aimed to lift people out of poverty, rather than enable their perpetual dependency on handouts.

In the decades that preceded the 1996 reform, poverty numbers reveal a lot about the situation at the time. In 1979, there were over seven million children in families receiving benefits from AFDC, a proportion equivalent to about 1 in 9 children in the U.S.³ Only 13% of AFDC families included an adult that was working “on the books” at the time, and nearly half of the families had been receiving the benefits for greater than two years; about 27% had been receiving benefits for greater than five years.⁴ By the year 1992 when Clinton was campaigning for the presidency, the proportion of U.S. children in families receiving AFDC benefits had risen higher to 14% of children, or roughly 1 in 7 children in the U.S. Notable, too, is that only 7% of the families receiving aid reported any family earnings.⁵

The most significant component to the 1996 welfare reform was the introduction of work requirements into the equation for determining one’s eligibility for aid. Recognized authority on poverty studies in the U.S., Scott Winship of the American Enterprise Institute, offers the following overview of what changed because of work requirements introduced through the reform: “In March 1979, 58 percent of single mothers were employed, and about half received AFDC at some point during the year. In 1992, the employment rate was still 58 percent, and half of single mothers still received AFDC. However, by 2000, after the 1996 welfare reforms took effect, 71 percent of single mothers were employed, and less than one-quarter received benefits under AFDC’s successor program, TANF.”⁶

³ Scott Winship, “The Conservative Case Against Child Allowances,” *American Enterprise Institute*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-conservative-case-against-child-allowances/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

The key attributes of TANF that compelled its adoption by Democrats and Republicans alike were that it introduced mandatory work and job search requirements as well as lifetime limits on assistance.⁷ It also created structural change that made it so TANF funds would be managed and distributed through the states by way of block grants, a nod to the reality that each community had different needs and therefore needed to be overseen with closer proximity than the federal government could offer.⁸

While there is some contention among economists and policy professionals about how to measure material poverty in the U.S. (notably whether an evaluation of one's proximity to the poverty threshold should be measured inclusively or exclusively of the welfare benefits received as a form of income), Winship goes on to point out that in the decades post-1996 reform, poverty in the U.S. remains significantly lower than in the pre-reform era. "By 2019, just 2.2 million children were [in families receiving TANF], or one in 33 children. And poverty among the children of single mothers was at an all-time low—lower by four or five million than if poverty had remained at its 1993 level."⁹

FDR on Participation and Compassion

1996 was not the only time in U.S. history where leaders sought to balance a responsibility to care society's most vulnerable with an understanding of the importance of work.

At the time of his New Deal proposal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's America had seen unemployment rise from 1.6 million people in 1929 to 12.8 million people (25% of the labor force) in early 1933.¹⁰ Hard economic times put immense stress on families, who in turn grew to be afflicted by secondary woes of divorce, alcoholism, and other social ills. Therefore—much like in today's day and age—the stakes were high and country in a place of great volatility. Through the creation of entities such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Roosevelt sought to provide meaningful relief to desperate Americans.

However, unlike some current legislation proposals, Roosevelt's New Deal solutions were not based on ideas of entitlement, but on provision of jobs for those free to work.¹¹ Roosevelt is on

⁷ "The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996," *Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, August 31, 1996, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/personal-responsibility-work-opportunity-reconciliation-act-1996>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Scott Winship, "The Conservative Case Against Child Allowances," *American Enterprise Institute*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-conservative-case-against-child-allowances/>.

¹⁰ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (New York: Regnery Publishing, 1994), 152.

¹¹ Ibid, 154.

record criticizing government handouts, notably stating in 1933 the following: “When any man or woman goes on a dole something happens to them mentally and the quicker they are taken off the dole the better it is for them and the rest of their lives.”¹² Additionally, in 1935, Roosevelt expanded his perspective further: “In this business of relief we are dealing with properly self-respecting Americans to whom a mere dole outrages every instinct of individual independence. Most Americans want to give something for what they get. That something, in this case honest work, is the saving barrier between them and moral disintegration. We propose to build that barrier high.”¹³

FDR’s stance of balancing compassion with respect for the universal call to community participation echoes loudly in the present day through the voice of Senator Joe Manchin (WV). Manchin, one of the most moderate Democrats in a staunchly divided Senate, was quoted as recently as October 18, 2021, sharing the following perspective on the proposal to expand the CTC to reflect universal aid in perpetuity: “I think we should still be a compassionate, rewarding society,” Mr. Manchin said, then added, “but compassion means taking care of those who can’t take care of themselves, whether they’re young, whether they have some type of a challenge in life, whether it be mental or physical. Those are the responsibilities that we have.”¹⁴ Manchin has called for new spending related to U.S. families to be “needs-based with means-testing guardrails,” a position incongruent with leading proposals of the Biden administration that seek eliminate rather than embolden existing means-testing.¹⁵

The Efficacy of Child Allowances: Time has Yet to Tell

Thus far, I have outlined how policies that tied welfare benefits to work requirements affected material poverty in the U.S. While the reductions in poverty have been notable, it is reasonable that society still desires improvements such that no person’s most basic needs remain unmet. It is at this point that many scholars and policy makers propose a policy for a child allowance, a move that would usher in a new frontier of welfare policy in America.

Simply put, the jury is out on the long-term efficacy of child allowance policies and their role in combating material poverty.¹⁶ Variations and innovations on this policy (“baby bonus” in Australia, “Canada Child Benefit”, U.K. Child Allowance, etc.) are many throughout the developed world. Since the enactment of various cash transfer programs linked to the number

¹² Grace Adams, *Works on Relief* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), 11.

¹³ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (New York: Regnery Publishing, 1994), 154.

¹⁴ Jonathan Weisman and Emily Cochrane, “Benefits for All or Just the Needy? Manchin’s Demand Focuses Debate,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/08/us/politics/manchin-democrats-means-testing.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lyman Stone, “Cash for Kids? Assessing the American Family Act,” *Institute for Family Studies*, March 12, 2019, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/cash-for-kids-assessing-the-american-family-act>.

of children reared in a household, there have been interesting, yet inconclusive developments in the realm of poverty, fertility, and labor force participation. I submit that the greatest challenge to measuring the true efficacy of a child allowance as a tool to combat material poverty, is the fact that such an end cannot be isolated from other related social outcomes that drive the adoption of such policies.

Many opponents of a child allowance policy cite a potential threat to work productivity via the income effect as a top concern.¹⁷ Such reasoning is valid given the recent history showing the positive association between increased work and reduction in material poverty in the U.S. However, an income effect that changes the real wealth of a family matters beyond the general trade-off between work productivity and leisure. As previously stated, it's unclear whether a child allowance would result in a decrease in work among recipient families, especially the dichotomy of such an implication between low- and middle-income families who would receive the allowance.¹⁸

On the other hand, policymakers—including but not limited to Senators Romney, Lee, and Rubio—who seek to enact “pro-natal/pro-family” policies have advanced proposals that reflect an expansion of the CTC while maintaining elements of work requirements.¹⁹ These proposals purport an expanded CTC to be less of an anti-poverty tool for lower income families, and instead an incentive for more middle-class families to have, for example, four children instead of three, by making it more affordable for one parent to stay home and raise the children while the other parent works. It is similarly unclear whether this alternative proposal would have any of its intended—or unintended—effects, as there are few, if any, natural experiments around the world from which to learn.

Therefore, rather than splitting hairs over potential implications and unknown economic impact on material poverty in the U.S., I propose we consider the known implications and real impact on a different type of poverty—social poverty—that results from creating a culture of dependency on handouts rather than individual participation. Specifically, the U.S. ought to look to the U.K.’s experience in adopting policies that, like a universal child allowance, favor dependency as a remedy for material poverty, at the cost of driving up large amounts of social poverty.

¹⁷ Scott Winship, “The Conservative Case Against Child Allowances,” *American Enterprise Institute*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-conservative-case-against-child-allowances/>.

¹⁸ Lyman Stone, “Cash for Kids? Assessing the American Family Act,” *Institute for Family Studies*, March 12, 2019, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/cash-for-kids-assessing-the-american-family-act>.

¹⁹ Rebecca Rainey, “Romney Proposes Child Care Benefit for Families, Fueling Democrats’ Push,” *Politico*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/02/04/romney-child-care-benefit-democrats-465940>.

Case Study on a State of Dependence: The U.K.

Within the developed world, the U.K. has been a leader in advancing progressive social and economic policies in the name of compassion and equality. Its uptake of policies to federalize healthcare and redistribute wealth through government social/welfare programs stands as a glimpse of “what could be” if the U.S. continues down its current path as prescribed by the proposals to make the Biden administration’s temporary provisions on the CTC, permanent.

In 2001, Anthony Daniels, writing under the name of “Theodore Dalrymple”, published a book, his collection of essays about his experiences as a physician, working in the Winson Green Area of Birmingham, England—an area known for its high levels of poverty. The book, *Life at the Bottom*, presents Dalrymple’s observations of how an entire class of people whose material needs are almost entirely provided for by way of government handouts or subsidies have allowed a state of dependency to deprive them of their most fundamental dignities as human beings. More specifically, the subjects of Dalrymple’s essays have lost an understanding that they are made in the image of the Creator, and therefore called to a participation in creation through work. Through subscription to a philosophy of social determinism, this group, whom Dalrymple calls “the British underclass” believes that the dismal situation in which they live is the best it will get, and that if things are going to change, the onus is on the government to do something about it.

In *Life at the Bottom*, Dalrymple relies on information gathered from some 10,000 interviews amidst his experiences working with patients who were repeatedly admitted to the hospital for drug overdose or attempted suicide. He shows that when his patients know that he/she will neither be refused treatment nor bear the responsibility of incurring the cost of said treatment, there is little disincentive for an individual to remedy the circumstances that placed him/her in the hospital in the first place. This sad reality is especially true when an individual, by spending time in the hospital, knows he/she is not missing anything because there is not accountability to hold and keep a job either.²⁰

Dalrymple goes on to describe the chronic cycles of abuse and neglect, exacerbated by substance abuse and sexual promiscuity that seem to plague individuals whose material needs are fully tended to—they have food, water, shelter, access to public education, and access to publicly-funded healthcare.²¹ Motivation and the need to work, to earn, and to provide are entirely diluted, if not totally stifled because of the pervasive question among such a people: “what’s the point?”

²⁰ Theodore Dalrymple, *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview that Makes the Underclass* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003).

²¹ Ibid.

If the government will pay for unemployment, provide a child allowance and food assistance, public housing and healthcare, what then *is* the point of man doing anything on his own accord to augment his situation? Why, if the government is so committed to eradicating material poverty, are Dalrymple's patients not living in total euphoria?

While sociologists and economists, doctors and politicians could hypothesize for days about why this group, the British underclass, lives in such destitution despite the government's satisfaction of their material needs, Dalrymple states simply and decisively that such a group is suffering from a different kind of poverty: social poverty, brought about by the neglect of a right relationship between man and work that results from the exchange of individual participation for complacent dependency.

The Right and Foundational Relationship between Family, Community, and Government

Renowned author Fyodor Dostoyevsky points us to a deeper consideration of this broader question surrounding the relationship between family, community, and government in stating the following: "Man is a creative animal, doomed to strive toward a goal, engaged in full-time engineering." We are made to create, not just merely observe. We are made to participate, not just passively depend."

We are made to participate, not just passively depend. This truth about man's nature exists in tension with the worldview that is driving the promotion of a universal CTC that offers unconditional aid in perpetuity. For Dostoyevsky, a Christian, man's nature as a creative animal reflects his being made in the image and likeness of the God who created him. However, he expands beyond personal theological understanding of the human person by pointing us to a universal truth about how man, as a social, emotional, and relational being that is unlike other animals, has existed rightly within the social order throughout human history.

Across cultures and over the course of the millenniums, the family unit has been the primary line of defense and support in the face of the ills we incur in this life—health, financial, emotional, etc. Long before there were large metropolitan cities or federally run transportation networks, one was only able to turn to his household for help in times of difficulty. The household and the corresponding relationships it fostered was the center of the human experience until the dawn of industrial revolution when men began to leave the home for work more regularly. Work to be done in the household wasn't necessarily synonymous with employment; however, it was significant because it affirmed the nature of man to create, to participate, and to do so within a community of other people.

Beyond the family household, one's broader local community informs and affirms man's nature to create and participate. As households grew more connected by way of transportation networks, the broader community offered new possibilities for greater creativity and participation. Local communities thrived—and continue to thrive—upon the reciprocal and collective participation of households in shared life. As organized around churches, meeting halls, or other affinity groups, communities create a secondary line of natural support and defense for an individual in light of his or her inevitable hardships in this life.

Finally, then, it is worth noting that there is goodness in an organized form of government which derives its role and responsibility to act as a protector for those whom the household and the local community are ill-equipped or incapable of supporting on their own. To offer protection with compassion via a temporary safety net is the rightly ordered role of government within an organized society of creative, participatory men. It is critical to understand, though, that the government itself *is* the community, as it derives any authority or influence from the people who consent to its existence. Therefore, one must be careful not to associate failure of the local community to provide as synonymous with a call for government to intervene, as government is merely an expanded understanding of the same community.

The balance in this matter, however, is that government does not go beyond its charter to protect by assuming the role of provider. Its job, as an extension of the community, is to protect the vulnerable from fraud or exploitation, seeking to arbitrate justly, the economic dealings of the world. It remains the responsibility firstly of man to work for his provision, then turn to his household and local community in times of difficulty for temporary relief.

Therefore, at stake in this debate over the merits of permanently modifying the CTC to eliminate reciprocal work requirements is not merely a question of whether one wants to alleviate material poverty in our country; rather, it is more deeply a consideration of the nature of man as a creative and participatory being and the extent to which we acknowledge and evaluate the implications of social poverty on the human person should we assert the government to be provider rather than protector. Man is not made to collect aid in perpetuity without reciprocity. Rather, he is destined to create and is made for relationship.

Conclusion

There are taxpayers, who at face value, will consider the permanent transformation of the Child Tax Credit to a child allowance within the Biden administration's proposed legislation, to be an act of compassion. However, for those who are interested in transforming cycles of generational poverty, a closer consideration of compassion is worth noting.

Recall, there is a right time and place—an Overton window—in which act of extreme generosity or expansive relief is not only good, but in fact necessary to alleviate the hardships incurred by fellow men. Such reasoning can be used to defend the temporary enactment of a child allowance through the American Rescue Plan.

Given the irrevocable dignity of each human person, we are called to ensure the provision of the basic needs of food, water, and shelter. It is in recognizing this fundamental dignity of the human person, though, that true compassion goes beyond provision and instead leads to participation. This truth has been made manifest through the positive outcomes witnessed in the U.S. following the 1996 welfare reform that instituted work requirements and revitalized reciprocity within the social contract among men.

Moreover, it is in man's most fundamental nature to work as a creative being. The type of work should and does vary among people, but the overarching reality is that man, most fully actualized, is in accord with his nature when he, as an image-bearer of the Creator, is like Him, creating through his work. Therefore, any circumstances in which this right and responsibility to participate in work are diminished, can be understood as harmful to the nature of men.

While the idea of a child allowance in the U.S. is somewhat new, and its economic effects rather ambiguous depending on the measure of societal improvement that is of interest, we are not operating without any foresight into what the effects could be.

Let the U.K. be a warning; there is more on the line when the government seeks to alleviate social ills than only material poverty. There is no question that material poverty of one's basic needs is an essential challenge to our world. However, social poverty, under the guise of laziness or comfortability brought about by small bits of dependency, can quickly devolve into a state of desolation, further alienating man from his nature to create and work. If we are not careful, the goodness of work that honors man's nature can easily be replaced with a passive state of dependence, something of which we should be wary, given the lived reality of the U.K. What's at stake for America is not just a new proposal for welfare policy, it's a proposal for a new way of life; we ought to be diligent in our evaluation of the matter, as its consequences are deep and lasting.

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About the Kautz-Uible Economics Institute

The Kautz-Uible Economics Institute creates opportunities for enhanced learning and growth for students, faculty, and alumni of the University of Cincinnati's nationally ranked Department of Economics in the Carl H. Lindner College of Business. Established in 1982 as the Hewett-Kautz Fund, the institute's mission has steadily expanded and continues its transformational impact.

The institute currently supports the economics department through:

- The Kautz-Uible Fellowship Program, which offers scholarships and the Caroline M. Kautz book prize to outstanding economics students;
- An annual lecture series, presented by prominent economists;
- Annual domestic and international travel by undergraduate and graduate student groups;
- The Kautz-Uible Women in Economics Initiative, which provides scholarships and mentoring to economics students;
- The Kautz-Uible Research Initiative, which provides faculty-supervised research opportunities to undergraduate and graduate students;
- A Pathways to Success Initiative, which offers mentoring, scholarships, and study-related travel opportunities to students who belong to groups that have been historically underrepresented among economics majors at UC;
- The Kautz-Uible International Scholar Program, which financially supports the hosting of a reputed international scholar for up to a year;
- Faculty recruitment and retention through the establishment of chair professorships.