



EDITORIALS

# Cap on kids was a failed welfare experiment



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

**Repeal efforts find support on multiple fronts at the State House as concern rises for the Commonwealth's neediest children.**

MARCH 06, 2019

A generation-long experiment that capped family welfare benefits, by penalizing those who gave birth while on public assistance, is at long last headed for the scrap heap of bad ideas in Massachusetts. The day can't come soon enough.

Repeal of the so-called “[cap on kids](#)” has been kicking around on Beacon Hill for several years. It almost made it through in the waning days of the 2018 legislative session. So this year lawmakers are taking no chances. There is, of course, a freestanding bill to repeal the cap. And with 104 sponsors in the House and 27 in the Senate, its passage seems assured. Governor Charlie Baker has included repeal and other welfare reforms in his 2020 budget proposal.

But newly named Senate Ways and Means Committee chairman Michael Rodrigues (D-Westport) sped up the process, adding the repeal measure to a must-pass \$143.9 million mid-year spending bill.

The cap on kids was one of those mid-1990s Clinton-era welfare reforms aimed at addressing multigenerational poverty. In Massachusetts, it had its roots in the horrific scalding and neglect of [5-year-old Ernesto Ventura, in 1994](#), at the hands of his mother Claribel, a 26-year-old mother of seven. Within a year, the Legislature had passed, and Governor William Weld had signed, what was then called the “toughest in the nation” welfare reform bill.

By the end of the decade, 21 states and the District of Columbia had adopted similar caps. But then the national legislative fever began to subside and the story of the “[welfare mom](#)” having kids with the sole intent of collecting more in benefits indeed turned out to be more myth than reality.

[A study](#) by Rutgers University (New Jersey was among the first to pass a cap on welfare benefits) found “virtually identical” birthrates among welfare mothers before and after the law passed, and both were “consistent with birthrates in the general population of New Jersey.” At least four states, including California, have already repealed their caps.

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute and Greater Boston Legal Services, which support repeal, maintain that the law currently deprives some 8,700 children of benefits. The remedy would cost the state about \$13 million a year, which advocates say is readily affordable given the drop in overall numbers of welfare recipients. (Welfare benefits would go up about \$100 a month to cover each currently uncovered child.)

The truly pernicious part is that the cap penalizes all siblings who then need to be fed and clothed with the same size benefit. [Children's Health Watch](#) reported, "From 2010-2016, almost one-third of 1,358 caregivers receiving TAFDC [Temporary Aid to Families with Dependent Children] with children under the age of 4 interviewed at Boston Medical Center reported a child not supported on the family's TAFDC budget because of the family cap rule." The results were all too predictable – food insecurity and poor health outcomes.

Legislative trends come and they go. This one has clearly outlived whatever usefulness lawmakers thought it might have had more than two decades ago. It's time to put caring for the state's neediest children back on the priority list.

*An earlier version of this editorial gave the incorrect name of the groups that support repeal of the so-called welfare cap on kids. They are known as the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute and Greater Boston Legal Services.*