Caring for Mom and Dad

Throughout the twentieth century, the United States implemented social policies targeting the needs of dependent parents – parents who were no longer able to work but lacked sufficient financial resources to support themselves. These parent dependency policies either encouraged or required family members, particularly adult children, to provide support as an alternative to government benefits. Debates over how best to support aging parents centered on conceptualizations of dependency and the moral obligations the family owed their parents. Measures of dependency often inhibited aging Americans’ access to benefits they needed, focusing instead on ensuring that they were, in fact, dependent and that other family resources were not available. Susan Stein-Roggenbuck highlights this understudied aspect of the modern US welfare state, highlighting the limited support provided to aging parents and the hardship they and their adult children endured in the efforts to minimize public expenditures.

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Parent Dependency and American Social Policy

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For Mom
Contents

List of Maps page viii
Acknowledgments ix
List of Abbreviations xii

Introduction 1
1 Resisting a Right to Relief: States, Responsible Relative Laws, and Old Age Assistance 28
2 “This Responsible Relative Racket”: Contesting Family Support Obligations 77
3 Aging Parents and Survivor Benefits: The Challenge of Proving Dependency 120
4 Taxing Rewards: Parent Dependency and American Tax Policy 156
Conclusion 189

Bibliography 205
Index 220
Maps

1.1 Support laws by state in 1954  
1.2 Recovery and responsible relative laws by state in 1954  
C.1 Responsible relative laws by state in 2021
Acknowledgments

Parental care was more an abstraction when I started researching parent dependency policies. At that time, my parents were retired and living in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Mom was a cancer survivor and she and Dad were healthy otherwise. They enjoyed cross-country skiing and snowmobiling, and spent their summers sailing the northern Great Lakes. As I worked on this project, Mom’s cancer returned and we lost her in 2017. This project became less abstract as my own parents aged and we cared for Mom in her final illness, and then for Dad as he created a new life alone after 56 years of marriage. Conversations with friends and colleagues revealed so many stories of aging parents. They shared their experiences in caring for parents, from helping with errands, medical appointments, and household tasks to paying for medical care or mortgages. Many provided significant support for parents, and some balanced caring for aging parents with raising their own children. I began to see how many people were quietly helping parents navigate their later years. The stories I encountered in this research recounted challenges similar to my friends and colleagues – adult children seeking to help parents in a social policy system that only recognized elder care when it suited the needs of the administrative state.

Many people helped move this project from an idea to a book. No historian can work without the knowledge and assistance of librarians and archivists. From my first trip to the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, Tab Lewis helped me navigate the records of the Social Security Administration and other collections. Archivists at the California State Archives in Sacramento, the Archives of Michigan in Lansing, the National Archives in Washington, DC, and the Indiana
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I dedicate this book to my mom, Lois Stein, whose generosity of spirit was unmatched, and whose infectious laughter and smile brightened any space. We miss her terribly. I wish she was still here to care for.
Abbreviations

AB – Aid to the Blind
ADC – Aid to Dependent Children
AFDC – Aid to Families with Dependent Children
BPA – Bureau of Public Assistance
CCB – California Council for the Blind
CCOAP – Citizens Committee on Old Age Pensions
CTA – California Taxpayers’ Association
DPW – Department of Public Welfare
DSW – Department of Social Welfare
FERA – Federal Emergency Relief Administration
IRS – Internal Revenue Service
NFB – National Federation for the Blind
NWRO – National Welfare Rights Organization
OAA – Old Age Assistance
OAI – Old Age Insurance
OAS – Old Age Security
OASI – Old Age and Survivors Insurance
OASDI – Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance
SSA – Social Security Administration
SSB – Social Security Board
SSI – Supplemental Security Income
WPA – Works Progress Administration