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LOSING GROUND: THE POOR AND GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

4 [by Amelia Preece]

Have government poverty programs increased the number of poor? Have they caused the breakdown of poor families? According to Charles Murray in *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*, the poor are harmed by government programs. Murray claims that poverty programs have reduced the motivation to seek employment, maintain marriages, or to marry if pregnant. He also claims that poverty programs have reduced black teenage labor force participation, reduced the quality of education, increased illegitimacy, and increased crime rates. His work is the academic version of the long held conservative view that public assistance undermines the character.

The number of Americans who would be living below the government poverty level if no government support had been received has increased since 1968, when many government support programs began or increased. Murray believes that government programs caused this increase in the number of people who would be poor if they had received no government support. Murray also claims government programs caused the poverty rate of black households to stop falling after 1969.

However a study out of the University of Wisconsin, *Losing Ground: A Critique* by Danziger and Gottschalk, disputes Murray's findings. Danziger and Gottschalk claim that poverty rose because unemployment rates rose due to a deteriorating economy. If government benefits to the poor increase the number of poor, then one would expect that falling benefits would reduce the number of poor. However, the poverty rate has continued to rise while benefits to the poor have been falling. Also poverty levels in different states have not been affected by different levels of support, contradicting Murray's claim that government support provides incentives to be poor. Crime and illegitimacy started rising before these programs started; these trends result from changing social norms, not changes in economic incentives. Murray also overstates the decline in black teen's labor force participation rates since black teens are in school or the military more frequently than they were in the 1960's.

Who Is Poor? -- The poor tend to be in households where there is no earner or only one poorly paid earner. Between 1969 and 1978, 25.1 percent of the total U.S. population received some welfare, including AFDC, SSI, Food Stamps and some other welfare programs. Most who received welfare in any year still received the majority of their income from other sources.

There are few permanent welfare families. Seventeen percent of those who received welfare receive it for eight or more years between 1968 and 1978. Of these heavy users 72 percent are elderly or disabled or have heads of household who are elderly or disabled.

Most who spent time being poor did not remain poor. Temporary poverty results from job loss, illness, marital instability, or the birth of a child. Childbirth may require a women to leave the labor force to care for her child reducing income below poverty or it may cause a single women to form a new household away from her parents, creating a new poor household.

It is the new poor households with female heads that Murray sees as especially harmful. Without government support, he assumes that single female heads of households would have stayed married, would not have had children out of wedlock or would have lived with their parents after the birth of a child.

Danziger and Gottschalk, however, found no evidence that government payments influenced divorce rates or number of single mothers. These have continued to rise in spite of falling government welfare spending, and they are no lower in states with low benefits.



While divorce is frequently the reason white women are poor, two thirds of the poor divorced black women were in poor households before they divorced.

Welfare does not persist over generations. For example, adult children from black families which were heavily dependent on welfare were no more likely to receive welfare than other black adults.

Children are the largest group of poor today. Reductions in support have forced families with children much further below the poverty level (LCR 157). Almost half the black male teenagers who are in the labor force are unemployed. With no job it is impossible for most young black men to support a family. Thus for many young women marriage is not an alternative to welfare. It is almost impossible for a single parent to work full time and to care for young children. For women, who are more likely to be responsible for children and whose wages are lower than those of men, wages from full time work often do not cover child care costs.

Murray supports a reduction in poverty programs, which will harm the poor both in the short run and in the long run. For most households, welfare programs offer stop gap assistance in periods of poverty. Welfare payments buy basic necessities such as food, shelter, and child care. Other programs provide necessities to the old. The major decline in poverty since the 1960's has resulted from increased government support of the elderly, who receive the majority of federal support.

How Poor is Poor -- The Government poverty figures understate the actual poverty in the U.S. According to the government, a family of four in 1983 needed an income above \$10,178 a year to be above the poverty income. However, the food budget used to calculate this poverty income level is based on a diet which is not healthy for long term use. If the minimum cost adequate diet had been used instead to determine the poverty income, the 1983 poverty income for a family of four would be \$16,560.

Reducing Poverty -- The two major reasons for increased poverty have been increased unemployment and increased marital instability. Murray's policy recommendations focus on decreasing marital instability. While his solution would not be successful, it would be inhumane. Government policy should not be based on forcing people to enter or remain in unsatisfactory marriages or in forcing women to give up children because of poverty. Studies have found that lack of alternatives to remaining married increases the chance of family violence.

Most people receiving government support need it. Many can not enter the labor force because of disability, age, caring for infants or young children. Others do not have jobs with which they can support their families. The AFL-CIO has called for humane policies that will really help the poor. These call for the government to promote full employment, improve unemployment compensation, improve health care for the unemployed, enforce equal opportunity, promote pay equity, increase the minimum wage, and reduce work hours. Recommendations that especially benefit parents include strengthened day care, allowing time off for child illness, flexible hours, and improved funding of family support.

These policies reduce poverty by allowing individuals to become self supporting. It is these policies which will reduce the breakdown of families and individuals because they enable all to live decent lives, and improve their own lives.

-- *Amelia Preece*

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