

Ben Carson is wrong — eradicating poverty is not mind over matter, housing matters most

The Hill, by Annie Wright, June 12, 2017 03:20 PM EDT

That poor people can overcome their circumstances through a mind over matter approach is a dangerous idea that ignores ugly realities.

Like a mole, we must whack it every time it rears its ugly head. Of all of the barriers that keep poor people poor, affordable housing may be the biggest.

Reliable access to a safe, affordable place to live is among the most basic of human needs. Without stable housing, all of the other benchmarks and pathways to the middle class are out of reach.

So when Housing Secretary Ben Carson, declared poverty is, in part, a state of mind, his comments led to an expected outcry. Of course one's mindset is "part" of poverty, but the question is what part?

And how big?

Our answers point to the kinds of interventions we can collectively support.

Carson has revisited debate about an American bootstraps mentality and what we collectively consider to be the deserving poor. It brings back to the surface the underlying ugly truth that we tend to think that being poor is the poor person's fault.

How convenient for us to hold this view because it lets the rest of us off the hook.

If poverty is a poor person's fault and within their control, then we need not lend a helping hand, do we? All a poor person has to do is change the way they think about their circumstances, right?

And presto-chango, a person living in dire circumstances can be the next Carson, super star surgeon, presidential candidate, and leader of a major federal agency that provides critical support to the nation's poor.

Undoubtedly, attitude matters. Resilience and grit and optimism are all real assets. Individual traits ranging from growth mindsets to grit have a legitimate role as we think about pathways out of poverty. But their role is smaller than we think.

In the grand scheme of things, even the best attitude, the most resilient state of mind, the mindsets most oriented toward growth, are a drop in the bucket against structural barriers.

Research on pathways out of poverty acknowledge the complex relationship between personal and public or cultural roles, and point to the weight of the cultural or social factors that can overshadow individual agency.

For instance, an initial benchmark for exiting poverty is being born a healthy birth weight, to a mother with at least a high school diploma, followed in quick succession by receiving adequate early childhood experiences that add up to having the pre-literacy and behavioral skills and knowledge that make a child ready for schooling.

These early building blocks then lead to a progression through schooling and a transition into adulthood that entails sufficient economic independence to live independently and to make an income that is sufficiently high.

And yet, at each step along the pathway, and starting at the youngest ages, access to the resources that allow people to navigate the path is blocked. Access to adequate nutrition and

healthcare (including prenatal care), great early childhood and then traditional school settings, and job opportunities is blocked if you are poor.

No amount of wishful thinking, grit, hoping, or as Carson tells it “spirit of mind” changes these harsh realities.

This is why Carson's statements are so chilling and so cruelly ironic. He is at the helm of an organization that may have the most power to fundamentally address poverty yet his sentiment threatens the very core of what public housing is, or should be, all about.

Annie Wright, a Dallas Public Voices Fellow, is Director of Evaluation for Southern Methodist University's Center on Research and Evaluation (CORE).

The views expressed by contributors are their own and are not the views of The Hill.