

PostEverything

American policy fails at reducing child poverty because it aims to fix the poor

If we want to help kids, it's time to focus on money, not marriage.

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From the first federal social welfare program for Civil War widows to Social Security and the 1960s War on Poverty, government support for poor families in the United States has attempted to enforce a moral hierarchy based on marriage: Widows got pensions they were considered to have earned, for example, while single mothers got shame and stigma for their moral misdeeds.

Since the 1960s, as marriage rates have fallen and women's employment opportunities have improved, fewer and fewer women rely on husbands for their material needs. Now, the majority of children no longer depend primarily on the income of a married father. And yet, our policies to alleviate poverty still remain focused on correcting the behavior of poor people — especially their marital behavior — rather than addressing poverty itself.

The stated goal of the 1996 welfare reform law, for instance, was not to alleviate poverty but to encourage marriage and reduce single parenthood. The problem was seen as poor character rather than poor income, and the solution was imagined as a matter of replacing the dependency of so-called “deadbeat” parents on the state with dependency on a spouse. Those who insisted on remaining unmarried were singled out for special censure: In the words of one architect of the reform effort, Ron Haskins, “mothers on welfare, even those with young children, should be encouraged, cajoled, and, when necessary, forced to work.” Today, many policymakers still want to impose conditions on families receiving food stamps and housing support, and as of 2015, marriage-promotion programs aimed at reducing poverty through matrimony had cost the federal government nearly a billion dollars.

One wonders if the money could have been better spent. There are about 6 million poor families with children in the United States — which means nearly 1 in 5 families with children in the wealthiest nation on the planet are living in poverty. My analysis of the latest federal data shows that, on average, these families' income — including tax credits and all sources of welfare — is about \$9,000 below the poverty line. That means ensuring no children grow up in poor households would cost \$57 billion a year. (To put that in perspective, that's how much money we'd get if Apple brought back the \$200 billion it has stashed overseas, and paid just 29 percent tax on it — it's a big problem, but it's small compared to the wealth of our society.)

We know growing up poor is bad for kids. But instead of focusing on the money, U.S. anti-poverty policy often focuses on the perceived moral shortcomings of the poor themselves. We don't try to address poverty directly, or alleviate it; we simply try to change the way poor people behave, especially poor parents. Specifically, we offer two choices to poor parents if they want to escape poverty: get a job, or get married. Not only does this approach not work, but it's also a cruel punishment for children who cannot be held responsible for their parents' decisions.

Policy that addresses poverty by punishing the poor for their perceived misdeeds plays on some popular misunderstandings, especially about marriage and parenting. Many non-poor people mistakenly believe that our lax attitude toward marriage is behind the child poverty problem. That's why a Heritage Foundation claim that marriage reduces the chance of living in

poverty by 82 percent has been a staple on the Republican campaign trail this season, and welfare money has been diverted from alleviating poverty to promoting marriage among the poor.

Yes, the children of single parents face steeper odds of success than their fellow citizens whose parents are happily married. Many single parents – the vast majority of whom are women – experience chronic shortages of money, time and social support. Their children are less likely to be closely supervised, to be well prepared for kindergarten, to graduate high school, and to make it through young adulthood free from entanglements with the criminal justice system. The intuitive case for more marriage is easy to see.

How then, as the share of children born to unmarried mothers has risen from just 1-in-20 in 1960 to 8-in-20 today, is it possible that child poverty has fallen, educational attainment has risen, and (at least since the 1990s) crime rates have fallen dramatically? There are two answers.

First, single parenthood doesn't just cause these social ailments, it also reflects them. Some of these problems are merely the consequence of whatever caused their parents to be single in the first place: poverty, illness, incarceration, weak relationship skills, and so on. In other words, successful people are more likely to raise successful children and to have successful marriages. Research on marriage among poor Americans clearly shows that the majority want to be married, but they aren't for a variety of reasons related to their poverty. Faced with poor prospects in a marriage partner, some women reason, "I can do bad by myself," as reported in the book "Promises I Can Keep," by Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas. Some couples place marriage on a pedestal, and plan to postpone it until they are financially stable. As one young man with a pregnant girlfriend put it, "I'd rather get engaged for two years, save money, get a house, make sure ... the baby's got a bedroom." For too many, however, that moment never arrives.

Poverty clearly lowers the chance of a successful marriage, even as being single may make it harder to escape poverty. This pattern is the subject of a long-running debate among social scientists. Although we can't agree on the exact breakdown of cause and effect, any reasonable researcher will concede it runs both ways.

But the second answer is perhaps more important for today's poverty debates. It is that the number of single-parent families doesn't drive the poverty rate – rather, it mostly helps determine which families and children will be poor, not how many will be. How many people live in poverty is largely the outcome of our policy choices, about jobs and wages, and support for poor families. A key study compared poverty rates and family structure in 18 countries, finding that the United States had the highest rate of poverty among single-mother families – more than 40 percent, compared with 5 or 10 percent in the Nordic countries. No country had as large a difference in poverty rates between single mothers and the rest of the population as the United States – that's our unique penalty for single parenthood.

Raising children takes work, and it's work that produces something of value: adults. Somehow, a slice of our national income needs to be allocated to cover that expense, the future benefits of which mostly won't return directly to the parents who raise them. We pay for this work in the formal economy all the time, in daycare centers and schools and doctors' offices – all the places people are paid to care for children. (Paid poorly, however, as Paula England recently explained in a brief for the Council on Contemporary Families.) The one time we don't want to pay for it is when parents do it for their own children at home. So the support is indirect, from a spouse, or parents pay themselves to do it – using their income from a paid job to give themselves time to raise their children. And when there's not enough income to cover the

children's needs, we need government support to make possible that unpaid work of raising children.

So how could we actually do it? A new report from the Century Foundation – by the respected poverty scholars Irwin Garfinkel, David Harris, Jane Waldfogel and Christopher Wimer – lays out some of the options. They take two approaches, expanding the current child tax credit (CTC), or joining much of the rich world in using a child allowance that gives families with children cash without conditions.

Our current tax policy (principally the CTC and the Earned Income Tax Credit) reduces child poverty to the shameful 17 percent it is from the catastrophic 24 percent it would be otherwise. The problem with these credits is that they only help people with jobs, leaving those who can't work – which is most of the poorest families – without assistance. They mostly aren't working because they don't have valuable skills, have health problems, or can't manage a job (or jobs) while caring for their families. Yet you need a job to claim the CTC, on the cruel logic that the government doesn't want to "disincentivize" work. The current CTC costs about \$50 billion per year but does almost nothing to help the very poor, because coercing or cajoling them into getting a job is useless. So we have 3.4 million children living in "deep poverty," in families with incomes less than half of what the government says they need (again, after accounting for all government benefits).

On the other hand, a universal child allowance could help everyone, and it might be more popular since middle-class voters would get a check, too. Although you end up giving non-poor people money they don't really need (some of which you could tax back), this is better than the tax credits because it more efficiently reaches the poorest families. Using a child allowance, the report says we could cut child poverty in half, and reduce deep poverty by two-thirds – for about \$200 billion per year. That seems like a lot – it is, after all, about one-eighth of the annual Pentagon budget for Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq – but wouldn't you sleep better at night knowing your poorer neighbors were sleeping better at night?

What about those pro-marriage policies? In short, they have failed; despite more than a billion dollars, marriage promotion programs have produced no increase in marriage. Furthermore, just as our tax policy doesn't help people who can't work, marriage doesn't help people who can't marry workers capable of supporting them and their children. A child allowance would provide an income floor for those who aren't married (they've been widowed or divorced, had abusive partners, have no one to marry – or, more rarely, don't want to get married). And it would do so without coercing them into marriage or shaming them for being single, because all parents would get it, married or not.

Our social policy – especially in the post-1996 welfare reform era – says a spouse's income is a good way to pay for children, and a job is a good way to pay for children, but government support is not. And the people behind our policy feel this so strongly that, rather than shape welfare policy to provide for the needs of children, they have crafted programs instead to pressure parents into either getting a job or getting married. And when neither of those is possible – or they are practically so undesirable that they may as well be impossible – then the suffering of the parent and her children is the cost of teaching that lesson to everyone else.

We know enough now to see that this approach doesn't work: It doesn't increase compliance with social norms on marriage and employment, and it doesn't stop the scourge of child poverty. We can do better.