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Senate HELP Committee Asks Whether Poverty Leads to Poor Health Outcomes

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A Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions subcommittee took on the feel of a cable television debate at times during a discussion Tuesday between Sens. Bernard Sanders and Rand Paul over whether low-income Americans have sufficient access to medical treatment.

The hearing -- titled "Is Poverty a Death Sentence?" -- was called by self-proclaimed Socialist Sanders, I-Vt., the chairman of the Subcommittee on Primary Health and Aging. He argued that "poverty in America today leads not only to anxiety, unhappiness, discomfort, and a lack of material goods. It leads to death."

Paul, R-Ky., who is supported by many Tea Party activists, took the opposite view by arguing that poor people typically can find medical care if they really need it.

"Capitalism in our country vanquished starvation along with smallpox and polio," said Paul. "Anyone who wishes to equate poverty with death must go to the third world to do so. Anyone wishing to equate poverty with death must seek out socialism and tyranny. Where you find command economies you will find death and starvation."

The debate over the responsibility of the federal government to provide for the poor will impact upcoming budget decisions.

The views of Sanders and Paul were echoed by medical practitioners and health policy analysts who testified at the hearing.

Sanders and Tennessee physician Garrett Adams cited Institute of Medicine statistics indicating that 45,000 Americans die every year because of lack of health insurance. Sanders also said that low-income people die about 6.5 years sooner than people whose income is in the top 20 percent.

But Tim Hulsey, a plastic surgeon in Kentucky, said that "in the USA, poor or not, if people cannot avoid medical problems by adopting a healthy lifestyle to prevent disease, they can choose to actively seek care and treatment through the myriad of sources I have mentioned,..There is little reason other than failure to seek care that poverty should be a death sentence in this country."

Michael F. Cannon, the director of health policy studies at The **Cato Institute**, said that American households that are officially classified as poor currently have access to amenities that not even the wealthiest people in the world could access even 20 years ago. He cited statistics suggesting that 65 percent of low-income people have a DVD player, 62 percent have a clothes washer, 55 percent have cell phones and 17.9 percent have a big-screen television.

Almost 22 percent of U.S. children live in poverty.

The subcommittee may hold additional hearings in the future.

Senate HELP Subcommittee Hearing

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