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Editorial: Safety net should not create work disincentive

By [Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board](#) | Sat, Sep 14, 2013

The Libertarian think tank Cato Institute reports that a New Mexico family – a mother and two children – can receive roughly \$30,435 a year from seven anti-poverty programs, both state and federal.

To earn that much working full-time, a person's hourly wage would have to be almost \$15 an hour – but withholding for taxes and benefits would diminish that worker's spendable amount.

The Cato study says New Mexico ranks 18th in the U.S. for the total dollar value of available welfare benefits, but it noted many recipients do not receive all of them.

This raises the question of whether the state's high level of benefits can create a disincentive for some recipients to look for work.

In the wake of the 2008 economic crash, spending on anti-poverty programs has burgeoned as jobless workers apply for assistance. About 47 million Americans get SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits, the equivalent of food stamps. Nearly 13 million get welfare checks through TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). Another 5.6 million people are on unemployment.

With today's slow recovery and high jobless rate, many former workers have had to turn to assistance programs. Some have given up looking for work.

If welfare benefits are higher than the pay for some entry-level jobs, as the Cato study suggests, the dilemma is how to maintain a safety net for those who truly need it and not make the social support system so attractive that it becomes a permanent way of life, which it was never intended to be.

If a person never has an entry-level job, chances are that person will never have a job. But relying solely on government benefits offers little hope for improvement. Without work, there is no ladder to climb.

Despite SNAP and other programs, almost 15 percent of Americans are considered to be food insecure and one in five children consistently goes hungry. So it's clear there is a need for a government safety net.

But while the question remains whether a deficit-plagued nation can afford it, the harder issue is whether we can provide it without it being a disincentive to work.

Policymakers should direct their efforts toward helping those who can work get into the workforce.