



Fight poverty with common sense

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I recently received an e-mail about a seminar on poverty in Indianapolis. The keynote speaker is urban activist Robert Lupton, who wrote the book "Toxic Charity." His main point is that modern charity has done a horrible job of alleviating the ills of the poor. In fact, all it's really done is create more dependency. I fully agree.

A 2012 study by the Cato Institute revealed that the federal government spent nearly \$670 billion on 126 programs aimed at fighting poverty. State and local governments spent close to \$285 billion on anti-poverty programs. That's nearly \$1 trillion a year. Cato figured that amounted to nearly \$21,000 for every poor person or close to \$62,000 for a family of three living in poverty.

We have spent trillions of dollars fighting poverty and at the end of the day, the needle hasn't moved much. When President Lyndon Johnson announced his war on poverty, 19 percent of the American population was considered to be in poverty Today's it's 15 percent. A 4 percent drop over a 50-year period has to mean something, I'm just not sure what. It is better than the decrease in the child poverty rate -- 22 percent today, 24 percent in 1964.

The problem with most anti-poverty programs is that advocates want to talk about things like raising the minimum wage, affordable housing, day care and mass transit. While I disagree on raising the minimum wage and subsidized housing, there is room for discussion on high quality early childhood education and responsible mass transit. However, you can't fight poverty unless you acknowledge the three things most likely to determine whether a person will prosper: graduate from high school and get a post secondary education; don't get married until after you turn 21; and don't have children unless you're married and have a full-time job. Doing those three things reduces your chances of being in poverty by about 80%.

Don't believe me? Here's what the National Center for Children in Poverty reports:

68% of kids in poverty live in a single-parent household;

88% of kids in poverty have a parent with no post-secondary education;

76% of kids in poverty have a parent who works only part-time or doesn't have a job.

So what are "common sense" solutions? For one, anyone who receives government assistance and didn't finish high school should be compelled to complete school or get a GED as a condition of public assistance. We should do more than just help people; we should help make them self-sufficient.

To help break the cycle, particularly in Indianapolis, I've always wondered why churches, the business community and higher education don't work together on a citywide after-school mentoring program. Churches would provide the space and after-school meals, colleges and universities would provide tutors and mentors and the business community would provide the financing. Not only would this help break the cycle of poverty by helping kids get a good education, but it also would ensure that they have contact with positive role models.

We've been fighting poverty for more than 50 years, and after spending trillions of dollars, all we have is a slightly lower percentage of poor people. How about trying something different, starting with common sense? All we have to lose is fewer people living in poverty.