

## **The awful truth about social programs**

By: MARGARET WENTE - October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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One night back in July, a shooting spree broke out in a Toronto social-housing project on Danzig Street. Two young people died. As usual, everyone was shocked that such a thing could happen here. As usual, people demanded more help for troubled neighbourhoods – more social workers, more basketball programs, more jobs, more youth counselling. People who run social programs warned that as funding ran out, more violence might explode.

Yet as I toured the neighbourhood, it struck me that the residents already got a lot of help. They had access to dozens of programs that would send their kids to summer camp, provide mentoring for youth, help students get in to community college, improve parenting skills, and find jobs for young adults with criminal records. Over the past seven years, the city has poured an extra \$210-million into programs designed to help Toronto's "priority" neighbourhoods.

What difference has that money made? Nobody has a clue. Nobody tracked the programs or measured the outcomes, or even collected local data on changing crime and dropout rates. City officials admit that because of the lack of basic information, it's impossible to evaluate the impact of these investments.

But that's not unusual. Other governments are no wiser. Hardly any of the countless programs that spend billions of dollars to help the poor and vulnerable are measured for results. According to the Cato Institute, the U.S. spends nearly a trillion dollars a year on anti-poverty measures – which works out to \$20,610 per poor person, or around \$61,000 for a family of three. "We are spending more than enough money to fight poverty but not spending it in ways that actually reduce poverty," argues the Cato Institute's Michael Tanner.

It's beginning to dawn on cash-strapped governments that this has to change. As public finances reach the breaking point, we've got to start spending public money more wisely. To do that, we need rigorous evidence about what works.

Now comes the discouraging part. The evidence to date – such as it is – suggests that many, perhaps most, social programs do not make a difference, except to the legions of administrators and social workers who are directly and indirectly employed in delivering them. This is not a conservative conclusion. It is the conclusion of independent groups such as the Brookings Institution (a non-partisan think tank) and the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, which are part of a growing movement to make social spending more accountable.

Here's one example of how big the problem is, as laid out by the Brookings Institution. The U.S. federal government funds dozens of programs to help youth. These include a \$1.2-billion after-school program for disadvantaged youth, a \$1.5-billion Job Corps program for at-risk high-school students, and the legendary Head Start program, which spends \$7-billion a year to help disadvantaged younger children. Ten of these programs, including Head Start, have been evaluated using the gold standard benchmark of random control groups. Nine of the evaluations found weak or no positive effects. A Brookings report says, "Only one program [Early Head Start, aimed at even younger children] was found to produce meaningful, though modest, positive effects."

These results are devastating. They suggest that most of the money we spend to help the poor and vulnerable is wasted. For what it's worth, conservative-inspired programs – Scared Straight, abstinence education, boot camp for young offenders, teacher pay for performance – don't work any better than liberal-inspired ones.

So, should we just throw in the towel? I don't think so. What we need to do is be more humble, more realistic and more selective. We need to let the evidence be our guide. Some small, inexpensive interventions appear to work reasonably well. One example is the Montreal Prevention Experiment, which was designed to reduce antisocial behaviour among disruptive boys between the ages of 7 and 9. Just a few family counselling sessions produced modestly positive long-term results. Another successful (though quite expensive) innovation is Pathways to Education, which steers vulnerable kids through high school and on to higher education.

Among the biggest advocates for evidence-based funding is Barack Obama, whose administration is working to redirect funding to programs with solid evidence of success. David Cameron's U.K. government is moving in the same direction. Canada lags far behind. The idea is suddenly hot stuff in Ontario, where Dalton McGuinty's government faces crushing deficits. But the truth is that the data needed to make decisions simply don't exist. As one insider says, "We've organized ourselves in such a way that mostly we have no idea what we're doing."

Governments are uniquely ill-equipped to overhaul their approach to social spending. To start with, they can't take the heat. All are saddled with giant legacy programs from the past. Any cuts to any programs, no matter how trivial, invariably spark a firestorm of hostile reaction, complete with heart-wrenching testimony from the victims.

Practically, politicians can't make big moves without broad-based support from the electorate. And in any case, governments are organized to spend money, not get results. They are equipped to measure volume, not outcomes. Government bureaucracies instinctively manage information in ways that will perpetuate the status quo (and themselves). On top of that, politicians include vast numbers of people who work in the helping industries. The sum of all these forces is a built-in inertia that makes it almost impossible to shift spending to programs that might be more effective.

The next frontier in social policy is to rigorously assess social programs so that we can identify the ones that really make a difference. Meantime, here's an idea. Let's take all the money we are spending to help the folks on Danzig Street and just give it to them. Maybe they'll use it to move to a better neighbourhood.