

ORANGE COUNTY
REGISTER

How to get serious about fighting poverty

Mark Landsbaum

September 26, 2015

We have it on good authority that the poor will always be with us. In the face of this irrefutable truth, lesser authorities demand we eradicate poverty. How do we rid the world of something that will always be with us?

That's not to say reducing poverty isn't worthwhile. People of faith – Christians, for example – and secularists, who worship at government's altar, share that understanding. Poverty is something to be overcome.

The United States government was so convinced of this that, a half-century ago, it declared war on poverty. By all accounts, the U.S. lost. That's based on government's own scorecard.

After \$24 trillion in government spending, the U.S. has every bit as much poverty as when President Lyndon Johnson and a compliant Congress launched the war in 1964.

Perhaps we lost because we shot ourselves in the foot. The legion of anti-poverty programs and handouts (yes, when you don't earn benefits, they are handouts) was predicated on "transfer of wealth." That's a progressive term best deciphered as: "to take money from people it belongs to, in order to give to people it doesn't belong to." In English, it's called theft.

It's a particular characteristic of government and progressive thinking that good can be accomplished by doing evil. Many well-intentioned people have been deceived by this perverse presumption. If they had stopped long enough to remember Mom's advice – "the ends don't justify the means" – they could have saved us much frustration, to say nothing of a few trillion dollars.

But it's absolutely inexcusable that, decade after decade, they persisted in this fiction, claiming it would work despite all evidence. All they needed was more time, more of someone else's money. Lenin and Stalin relied on the same playbook.

The ugly truth is, not only doesn't government redistribution of wealth eradicate poverty, redistributionists refuse to acknowledge what it actually does do after the theft. It incentivizes entitlement, and spawns generations of intentional non-contributors. Moreover, government's calculation of "poverty" is arbitrarily based on a percentage of all Americans' income. The more you make, the more another person can have and be considered poor.

Worse yet, government doesn't count as income almost all the billions doled out in means-tested welfare aid. The Cato Institute calculates that, when benefits are included, welfare pays better than entry-level jobs in 35 states.

Perpetuating this scheme, the Census Bureau declared poverty-level income to be \$24,230 for a family of four in 2014. Set aside the fact that \$24,230 would be living extremely high on the hog in most places on Earth, especially for 3 billion people living on less than \$912 a year.

Let's not even consider, as the Heritage Foundation's Bob Rector reports, that 42 percent of "poor" American households typically own three-bedroom homes with one and a half baths, a garage and a porch or patio. Let's ignore that the Census Bureau says the typical poor Americans have a car, 80 percent have air conditioning, 62 percent have cable or satellite TV, and half have computers, while more than 40 percent have widescreen TVs and Internet service.

Let's not even bring up the image of "poor" for most people, which likely resembles the homeless Joad family in the "Grapes of Wrath," scrounging for food. Let's ignore the fact that a scant 4 percent of poor children in America today were even hungry for a single day in the prior year because their families couldn't afford to feed them, which means 96 percent didn't go hungry even one day.

Let's ignore that a typical U.S. poor person's home has more living space than that of the average resident in Paris, London and throughout Europe, who is not classified poor.

Setting all that aside, let's consider a Christian precept that God permits trials and tribulations so that we will rely on Him, and to encourage us to voluntarily assist those in need. Compare that with government's secular religion, which perpetuates trials and tribulations so we will rely more on government.

Many churches understand that even acts of true mercy through entirely voluntary giving – in contrast with forced government redistribution – can be counterproductive if they don't encourage people to improve themselves. Here's some recommended reading: "When Helping

Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself" by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert.

Yours truly knows a confederation of churches that rotates the hosting of homeless families, providing meals and housing while parents seek work, and children attend school. One small church alone provided in 2014 the equivalent of \$25,537 in volunteered time, and donated food and supplies serving 16 families. Multiply that by 300,000 American churches, and you have \$7.6 billion, and that doesn't factor in 1,000-plus megachurches whose memberships are 10 or 20 times an average church's.

How much more could church-goers donate in true, effective charity if government stopped stealing congregants' money to redistribute through counterproductive programs? We might not win the war on poverty, but casualties should be considerably fewer.