



5 questions for Michael Tanner -- a policy expert who says we've made poverty too 'comfortable'

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What if, instead of operating a variety of anti-poverty programs, the government simply mailed every poor person in America a check big enough to lift them out of poverty? That, says the Cato Institute's Michael Tanner, would make more sense than what we do now – and, he says, we'd still have money left over.

Here's Tanner's math: By his count, the federal government spends more than \$668 billion a year on a total of 126 anti-poverty programs, including those that address housing, hunger, health care, and cash assistance. They range from TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), which most people associate with traditional welfare, to much smaller programs for Indian tribes, at-risk youth, and others. If you divide Tanner's total by the roughly 46 million people with incomes below the poverty line, you get nearly \$15,000 for every poor man, woman, and child in the U.S.

Tanner acknowledges that poor individuals don't receive that much money, and that's his point: government spending isn't laser-targeted to those most in need. In fact, he says, "throwing money at the problem has neither reduced poverty nor made the poor self-sufficient. It is time to re-evaluate our approach to fighting poverty."

You've taken a fair amount of heat for saying that America should "focus less on making poverty more comfortable." What do you mean by that? Is poverty ever comfortable?

Poverty is never a good thing. But most of the programs we have to combat poverty are based on taking people who are in poverty and giving them a little more income so their poverty doesn't feel quite as bad. Instead, we should be focused on how to we get more people out of poverty.

What do you think we are doing wrong?

The problem is that our welfare programs aren't targeted at the right things: education, pregnancy prevention, and job creation. They're targeted at giving people who are poor the resources to live in poverty.

We know that if you drop out of high school you're likely to be poor. If you graduate from college, your chances of escaping poverty are much greater.

We know that if you're a woman, don't get pregnant if you're not married. That's not a moral judgment, it's an economic one. It's simply more difficult to raise a child if you have one income rather than two.

And get a job, any job, even a low-wage job, and stick with it. Even a low-paying job is better than no job at all. People are more likely to move out of poverty if they have a low-paying job than if they are on welfare.

And we need to create more jobs. The fact is, we still have an anti-job atmosphere. Too many taxes, too many regulations. We don't do a very good job of creating an environment that's going to create more jobs.

What do we do about the millions of people who are in poverty right now? They are poor, they don't have skills, they don't have a good education, they don't have or can't get a job. Do we pull the safety net out from under them?

We should target our aid to those people who need the help the most. We have created a situation in which there are a certain number of people who are not going to be able to become an economically viable family unit anytime soon, and we probably have to support them in the short term. In the long term, however, we want to give people in the future more of an opportunity to avoid poverty and to get out of poverty.

It's unfair to compare my approach to utopia. Let's compare it to the real world and in the real world, the approach I'm talking about would mean fewer poor people than there are today. Would there be zero? No. I don't know if a society in the history of the world has ever had zero. Poverty in many ways is the natural condition of man. Throughout most of mankind's history, most people were poor. The question is, how do you create more prosperity?

People on my side of this have often appeared to be hard-hearted, by arguing on a dollars-and-cents basis. But you shouldn't measure compassion by inputs. You measure by outcomes. And by that measure, we're failing. And the burden is on the poor, who are the ones suffering in poverty.

So you think it would be more compassionate to blow up and restructure the system?

It's not fun to live in poverty. Poor people don't want to be poor. Most poor people would like to work. Most poor people would like to be non-poor. But we're not giving them that opportunity. The goal should be that each person gets to achieve their full potential. Most people trapped in the welfare system are not getting to do that.

It was Ronald Reagan who said, we fought a war on poverty and poverty won. Do you agree with that?

Let's put it this way: We are certainly not beating poverty. We may have had a draw but that's not where we want to be.