

## The newest attack on ‘freeloading’ welfare recipients

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Recently, Inboxes, Facebook and other Internet chatter has featured the assertion that Americans on welfare receive more benefits than the wages of entry-level positions in 35 states — another example of “blaming the victims,” which historically has targeted minorities, the poor and, recently, immigrants.

Based on a 2013 report from the libertarian Cato Institute (“The Work vs. Welfare Trade-Off”), the claim was spread by a radio host who dabbles in conspiracy theories and End Times talk, and linked to Right-wing sites.

‘Welfare’ is a term describing various public assistance for low-income Americans. Cato said 126 federal programs help the needy (plus state and local efforts), and the extremist spin is that assistance is lucrative, recipients are lazy, or government wants people to be dependent.

That might be appealing to those who feel victimized and need someone (preferably powerless) to blame. It can be tempting for people to see their circumstance as the fault of others who cheat or are undeserving. Such allegations can reinforce existing attitudes, whether racist or a resentment that others have it better, unfairly. Plus, for partisan advocates, such claims can be effective wedge issues dividing people who actually have much in common and even causing some to vote against their economic interests.

Cato’s original research used a single mother with two children as a “typical welfare family,” and presumes that household’s welfare package would include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, food stamps, Medicaid, housing help and utility assistance, plus the Women, Infants and Children program. Cato also figured in federal and state tax deductions, exemptions and credits. Although government programs help millions of Americans, from Social Security and veterans benefits to farm subsidies and home owners’ mortgage-interest tax deductions, this research focused on the poor.

Cato’s study does show that in the situation described, the mom would be eligible to receive more in value (not cash) than the average, pre-tax, first-year pay for teachers in 11 states, and

more than minimum-wage workers in 35 states. (The blog posting and email said “highest-paying entry-level job,” but that’s different than minimum wage, which is usually less.)

Cato’s report concedes that “most welfare recipients today are required to either work or participate in some form of job search” and that “benefits are likely to be at least partially offset by additional costs associated with going to work, such as child care, transportation and clothing.”

The resulting email misrepresents the study, which may be politically slanted but isn’t an unreasonable premise for a good discussion. But lies can gain credence when based on facts. Misinterpretation, exaggeration and cherry-picking so conclusions are out of context all can cause falsehood to metastasize like cancer — especially via social media, talk radio or cable TV.

More than 90 percent of the benefit dollars that welfare programs spend goes to helping members of working households, the elderly or disabled people — not able-bodied, working-age Americans who decline to work, according to the Center on Budget Policy Priorities.

The Washington Post’s Michelle Ye Hee Lee wrote, “This [blogosphere/email claim] is an example of how the findings of a report with many caveats and structured within specific parameters got misconstrued in an article and spun out of context with a poorly written (and click-bait) headline. It’s easy to jump to the conclusion that collecting welfare is easier than working in 35 states, but this report — and the issue — is much more nuanced and complicated.

“It captures the underlying conclusion the researchers arrived at through this study,” Lee continued, “For many recipients — especially long-term dependents — welfare pays more than the type of entry-level job that a typical welfare recipient can expect to find. [But] not all people eligible for welfare collect benefits. When they do, many of the benefits are contingent on some level of work-related requirement.”

Also, both the Cato study and the exaggerated interpretation in the blog neglect an obvious option: Improving wages and/or work.

Why? Welfare amounts are not enough to enable recipients to climb out of poverty. Using Cato’s example of a single parent with two children, “welfare” in Illinois would be \$13,580 a year. The U.S. poverty threshold for a single parent with two kids is \$20,090. Worse, a full-time employee working for minimum wage in Illinois (\$8.25/hour) would earn \$330/week or \$17,160/year — again, below the poverty line.

Recognizing a disconnect between work and welfare, it’s just as logical to argue that the minimum wage should increase so full-time workers can get out of poverty, or that more employees should unionize to collectively bargain for better pay.

No lie.