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### Rising Poverty and the Social Safety Net

What can government do to help the growing number of poor people in the United States? [E-MAIL](#) [SHARE](#) [TWITTER](#) [SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND](#)

#### Little Bang for the Buck

September 16, 2010

**Michael D. Tanner** is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

The new numbers from the Census Bureau showing that 14.3 percent of Americans are now living in poverty is a national disgrace – and a clear sign that we are doing something wrong.

The federal government currently operates 122 different anti-poverty programs, ranging from Medicaid to the tiny Even Start Program for Indian Tribes and Tribal Organizations. All together, the federal government spent more than \$591 billion in 2009 on means-tested or anti-poverty programs, and will undoubtedly spend even more this year. That amounts to \$14,849 for every poor man, woman and child in America. Given that the poverty line is just \$10,830, we could have mailed every poor person in America a check big enough to lift them out of poverty – and still saved money.

Given what we spend already, we could have mailed every poor person a check big enough to lift them out of poverty and still saved money.

Since we started the War on Poverty in 1965, the federal government alone has spent more than \$13 trillion fighting poverty. Including state and local government brings total anti-poverty spending over \$15 trillion. Clearly we have received very little bang for the buck. Throwing money at the problem has neither reduced poverty nor made the poor self-sufficient.

Perhaps its time to focus less on making poverty comfortable, and more on creating the prosperity that will get people out of poverty. That means that if we wish to fight poverty, we must end those government policies – high taxes and regulatory excess – that inhibit growth and job creation.

We must protect capital investment and give people the opportunity to start new businesses. We must reform our failed government school system to encourage competition and choice. We must enable the poor to save more, and build their own future.

After all, an effective anti-poverty program should be judged not by how much we put in but by what we get out.

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1.

David

New York

September 16th, 2010 6:57 pm

We don't have high taxes, so how can you trot out that tired old line again?

We are not the first nation down this road.

Stop pushing the Latin American model.

The private sector is not a magician's wand.

In developed East Asia and Europe much higher numbers of people are employed in day care centers, schools, public transportation, public hospitals, street cleaning, park maintenance, etc. – the low glamour jobs that never the less pay the bills.

This high level of maintenance of the urban environment and high number of helpers for the young and the elderly, the transportation systems are all maintained in large part through government subsidies such as low rent housing and universal health care.

Everyone benefits from the extra help, the convenient traveling and the good daycare, healthcare, clean streets, well maintained parks and education.

That is why no one on the right, even the far right in Europe ever talks about getting rid of government help.

In america help is trotted out by the Democrats like charity, by the Republicans—none at all.

What we need are policies which subsidize low end work so that it becomes a living wage, and do it as other nations do, so that we all get a lot from it.

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2.

Elizabeth

Florida

September 16th, 2010 7:16 pm