



Social welfare programs contain philosophical flaws, not financially beneficial for society on the whole

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It's been said that the first thing to do when finding oneself in a hole is to stop digging.

Over fifty years ago, Lyndon Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty in America.” So, how's the “war” been going? The answer depends on who's responding.

The Cato Institute, a conservative organization, issued a report in April 2012, authored by Michael Tanner, claiming that the total spending on anti-poverty programs by government at all levels approached \$1 trillion.

Tanner based his calculations on data from the Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance, the Congressional Budget Office, the Congressional Research Service and the U.S. Census Bureau. At the article's conclusion, he listed the names of 126 governmental agencies, as well as the cost and number of participants involved in the “war on poverty.”

Mike Konczal, associated with the liberal Roosevelt Institute, criticized the 1 trillion dollar amount in a Washington Post article in January of 2014. He breaks down the federal anti-poverty component into four categories: cash and cash-like programs; health care; opportunity-related programs; and targeted and community programs. His total: only “\$212 billion per year [is spent] on what we could reasonably call ‘welfare.’”

So, who's correct? As with many things, it all depends on the definitions used.

Tanner defines an anti-poverty program as possessing one of the following characteristics: it's either means-tested [aimed toward low-income people] or has language in the law specifically classifying it as an anti-poverty program.

Konczal characterizes the \$1 trillion claim as being “more interesting and complicated.” His definition of an anti-poverty program is more subjective. He says that a program can be labeled “welfare” if the category to which it belongs “is actually what we think of as ‘welfare.’” He goes on to say that labelling the cost of welfare as \$1 trillion would simply “mangle the term ‘welfare’ to be meaningless.”

Regardless of the definition, these programs contain two major flaws: one philosophical and one practical.

From a philosophical standpoint, no individual virtue or merit accrues in government programs. If someone donates money to directly feed the hungry, clothe the naked or any other action that used to be designated a Corporal Work of Mercy, that’s a virtuous act.

On the other hand, if an equal amount is forcibly taken through taxation, there’s no virtue, save that of obedience to the law. The beneficial effect emanating from good deeds has been replaced with coercion.

The practical objection to many of these programs has to do with waste, manifested in two ways. First, an entire new layer of bureaucracy must be created and maintained to administer these programs. Second, there is ample evidence that some who ultimately receive benefits are not entitled to them. In short, fraud.

One would think that a modern-day progressive would grow livid when realizing that every dollar wasted in bureaucracy or fraud is a dollar taken from its intended recipient.

Alexis de Tocqueville once remarked that “The American Republic will endure until the day Congress discovers that it can bribe the public with the public’s money.”

We’ve dug ourselves into a fiscal, definitional and moral hole.

Perhaps it’s time to put down the shovel.