

Researcher contends War on Poverty is expensive failure

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Editor's note: This is the third column in a series about the War on Poverty and why West Virginia is still poor with high unemployment.

Jesus Christ said the world would always have the poor after Judas complained that the woman who washed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume should have sold it and given the proceeds to the poor.

Jesus was correct. Despite America's official declaration of War on Poverty 51 years ago, the poor are still very present and still very needy.

However, one country's poor is not equal to another's. The poorest of Americans are among the richest of many countries' residents. Yet, in those other countries, the standard of living is much lower, too, proving Albert Einstein's theory that everything is relative.

Why can't the best minds in the wealthiest country lick this problem? The reasons are as many as the poor. The "why not" is especially relevant to a friend concerned why so many West Virginians get public assistance and few ever stop needing it.

The influence of politics in approving legislation and appropriating it is one reason. Free will is another. Yet another is the cyclical nature of generations from the same family who need assistance, of which free will plays a role. Poor choices seem to beget poor choices. Or, as Daddy was fond of saying of the children of people who repeated their parents' mistakes, "He didn't have a show," meaning the person did not have a positive example to see and aspire to.

Michael Tanner in his policy paper titled "The American Welfare State: How We Spend Nearly \$1 Trillion a Year Fighting Poverty — And Fail" lamented the expensive, expansive nature of public assistance.

Published in April 2012 by The Cato Institute, Tanner's paper noted rising poverty rates at a time of increased spending on anti-poverty programs. The Cato Institute is a conservative Washington think tank.

“Shouldn’t we judge the success of our efforts to end poverty not by how much charity we provide to the poor but by how few people need such charity?” he asked. “By that measure, our current \$1 trillion War on Poverty is a failure.”

Tanner argues that increased spending enables the poor rather than snapping them out of their bad habits, which is the gist of my friend’s concern.

Tanner cites rote solutions that government should let free enterprise run the economy and get out of business’ way so it can create jobs and elevate the prosperity of all. People should not have children out of wedlock. They should complete high school at least.

All of the above are correct — in a perfect world. That’s not so in a free country in which people are allowed to make bad choices. That’s not so in a free country whose founding documents suggest all people are created equal despite the reality they are not. That’s not so in a country that was founded on Christian principles in which government has a moral obligation to help those who — for many reasons — may not always be able to help themselves.

So here we are, spending what Tanner has calculated at \$1 trillion in federal and state dollars each year to subsidize 126 separate programs: 33 for housing, 21 for food or food purchases, eight for health care, 27 for cash or general assistance, and another 37 that include jobs, job training, education, etc.

The top nine programs Tanner identifies by spending are: Medicaid (not counting long-term care for the elderly), food stamps, Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Pell Grants, Supplemental Security Income, state Children’s Health Insurance Program, housing vouchers and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

It’s worth noting the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit are not paid out by the government but tax credits deducted from a person’s annual income.

“Despite this government largess, more than 46 million Americans continue to live in poverty,” Tanner concludes. “Despite nearly \$15 trillion in total welfare spending since Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty in 1964, the poverty rate is perilously close to where we began more than 40 years ago.”

Next week: The study titled “Trends in Poverty with an Anchored Supplemental Poverty Measure” argues the War on Poverty is a success.