



Conservatives Make Baltimore Riots a Case for Welfare Reform

Linked to the police brutality debate is concern over broader inequality. Is 'big government' to blame?

By Tierney Sneed

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With Baltimore becoming the latest city to draw national scrutiny after allegations of police brutality, conservatives are arguing the city's long-standing poverty is an indictment of the public assistance programs it has championed for decades.

Rep. Paul Ryan, the Wisconsin Republican who heads the House Budget Committee and has long been an advocate of dialing back entitlement programs, was the latest [on the right](#) to connect the current unrest in Baltimore to what he sees as the failure of big government to eradicate poverty.

“We just did 50 years of the War on Poverty. We spent trillions of dollars and we still have 45 million people living in poverty. Deep poverty is among the highest on record,” Ryan said Thursday, when asked by a reporter at a breakfast sponsored by The Christian Science Monitor to comment on the focus the Baltimore protests have brought to public investment in cities.

“We need to do another round of welfare reform – not as an exercise to save money, but as an exercise to save lives and to get people from welfare to work,” Ryan later added.

Riots broke out in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray, who suffered a severe spinal injury while in police custody and en route to booking last month. On Friday, Baltimore City State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby [announced a slew of charges](#) – including second-degree depraved-heart murder, involuntary manslaughter and assault – against the various officers involved in Gray's arrest and transport.

Gray's was but the latest in a string of high-profile deaths of unarmed citizens at officers' hands, which have prompted a broader debate over policing and race in the U.S. However, many see the outrage being driven in part by socioeconomic inequalities, particularly affecting communities of color. Thus the role of social welfare programs has entered the conversation.

“There's so much untapped potential in this country among our nation's poor that we need to help figure out how to tap that potential, team up, partner, collaborate, and what I would call

have bottom-up, organic, grass-roots, poverty-fighting strategies,” Ryan said. “Because this top-down, one-size-fits-all bureaucratized approach isn’t working.”

Over at National Review, Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, [wrote that](#) “big government has failed Baltimore” and argued that “if we learn nothing from what just happened – if we simply go back to throwing money at the same tired old programs – it will be just a matter of time until this happens all over again.”

Meanwhile, a Republican state lawmaker in Maryland entertained the idea of withholding public nutritional assistance from the parents of young people involved in looting during the protests.

“I think that you could make the case that there is a failure to do proper parenting and allowing this stuff to happen: Is there an opportunity for a month to take away your food stamps?” [Patrick McDonough said on a radio show](#) in response to a caller offering the idea.

The facts in Baltimore, however, don't easily fit the national narrative. Some have pointed out that the rioting occurred mainly among high schoolers, who may have been encouraged by social media to imitate a movie, "The Purge," in which crime is legalized for a 12-hour period. Following the initial violent melee, a number of peaceful protests were organized featuring local Baltimore celebrities and community activists who attempted to separate themselves from the group branded as "thugs" by the city's African-American mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake.

The comments of conservatives come [as a number of states](#) already have been considering changes to their welfare regulations. As the country slowly pulls itself out of the Great Recession, welfare critics argue that the persistent dependence on public assistance programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (more commonly known as food stamps) are evidence that the current systems aren't effective in lifting families out of poverty.

Federal lawmakers also are considering a budget that would cut funding to government housing programs meant to revitalize cities like Baltimore, [Politico reported Thursday](#).

Protests against police brutality have taken hold particularly in places where poverty and unemployment rates are high, suggesting that socioeconomic inequality exacerbates tensions with law enforcement and also fuels the unrest.

In Baltimore, poverty rates soar where African-Americans are concentrated. The neighborhood where Gray grew up is 96.6 percent African-American and has an unemployment rate of 24 percent, compared with 8.2 percent in the wider city and 5.5 percent nationwide, [according to a report cited by Al Jazeera](#). The medium household income for a white family in Baltimore is nearly double that of a black family, [census data collected by CNN shows](#).

These disparities occur in a place that has become [an emblem for](#) “decades of big-government liberalism,” as Tanner put it, and which also has a long history of African-Americans participating at the highest levels of city government.

He noted that even as the state is among the most generous in the country in the welfare benefits it offers, the poverty rate in Baltimore has increased from 10 percent in 1960 to nearly a quarter now.

“While some of the increase since then is a result of demographic and other structural changes, we’ve clearly been throwing a lot of money at poverty in the city without much result,” he wrote.

But Stefanie Deluca, a professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University who has studied poverty in the field in Baltimore, says recent media coverage of the economic conditions in Baltimore doesn’t capture the way low-income families are living and how they are using their benefits.

“It gives the impression that the extreme is the norm, and it makes it difficult [to see] that poor families and their children want what everyone wants,” she says. Little attention is paid to the more “boring aspects” of everyday life for poor families when the focus is on isolated incidents of violence and looting, she says.

“You have this narrative that all the families in the community and all their children are like this,” she says, adding that criticisms of welfare programs distract from problems related to [housing segregation](#), lack of employment opportunities and the [criminal justice system](#).

Republicans would like to see states have more flexibility in how they implement federally funded assistance programs; Ryan’s [most recent anti-poverty plan](#) would do so by consolidating various government programs into single block grants for states. Conservatives would also like to bulk up some of the work requirements put in place through the welfare overhauls enacted in the 1990s under the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton.

“We had some success in reducing poverty and helping people get into work with welfare reform,” says Richard Doar, a fellow in poverty studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a free-market think tank. “I don’t think we have had the success with Great Society programs that are more based on entitlement.”

There indeed is debate over whether the entitlement programs enacted under President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society were effective in reducing poverty. A report by [Ryan’s Budget Committee staff](#) points out that the official poverty rate has inched down by only about 2 percent in the last 50 years, despite hundreds of billions of dollars spent by the government on welfare annually.

However, a 2013 [Columbia University study](#) incorporating a different measure of poverty suggests that tax credits, food stamps and other government welfare programs brought down the poverty rate by 40 percent since the late 1960s. Children and the elderly [in particular](#) have benefited from the social safety net, though working adults continued to struggle at similar rates.

“What has become dramatically clear is that actually helping people put food on the table and meeting their most basic needs does help children succeed,” says Arloc Sherman, a fellow at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a progressive think tank.

[Research also has shown](#) the federal food assistance program has not only improved children's short-term prospects, but had a positive economic and health impact on their lives over many years as well. However, the success of nutrition benefits hasn't been able to counteract the rise in extreme poverty among the groups most affected by the 1990s welfare reforms, as shown by [a National Poverty Center study](#).

Other experts say attempts to make welfare programs more effective will continue to be hindered by a labor landscape in which many in the workforce still struggle to make a living wage, [an issue that's been the target of campaigns like Fight for \\$15](#).

Robert Barbera, co-director of Johns Hopkins' Center for Financial Economics, points [to a recent study](#) that shows 73 percent of recipients of public assistance nationally belong to households in which at least one member works, often in industries known to pay low wages. More than half of fast-food workers receive public assistance; the portion of child care and home care workers that depend on benefits is almost as high, according to work done by researchers with the University of California-Berkeley's Center for Labor Research and Education.

“I too agree that Medicaid and food stamps are bad news,” Barbera says. “But if you had the same person getting their compensation from their employer rather than government, they would be feeling a lot better about themselves.”