



Newly-Elected Congressman: Anti-Poverty Programs Are ‘A Bribe Not To Work That Hard’

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Anti-poverty aid programs are [nothing more than a bribe](#) to keep low-income people from getting married or going to work, according to a new U.S. Congressman from Wisconsin.

“When you look at that amount of money, which is in essence a bribe not to work that hard or a bribe not to marry someone with a full-time job, people immediately realize you have a problem,” Rep.-elect Glenn Grothman (R) said on a statewide television show aired Sunday evening.

When the show’s host gave him a chance to walk back the bribery line, Grothman instead doubled down. “Well, if you tell somebody you’re going to get \$35,000 if you don’t get married and you’re not going to get anything if you marry somebody making 50 grand a year, it’s certainly a strong incentive not to raise children in wedlock,” he said.

That \$35,000 figure is seemingly plucked from a [Cato Institute study](#) that was discredited more than a year ago by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). As the CBPP explained last August, the Cato study describes theoretical totals that a person could extract from a combination of anti-poverty programs without bothering to link that theoretical figure back to practical reality. The study’s assumptions about how bureaucratic rules and real-world experience interact produce “[a misleading portrayal](#) of the trade-off between work and welfare.” In the real world, CBPP wrote, the vast majority of public assistance program beneficiaries are working families rather than jobless ones, and very few families that receive public benefits tap into every available system in the way Grothman’s \$35,000 figure implies.

While Grothman’s use of the word “bribe” caught his interviewer’s attention, a different, less-inflammatory phrase in his remarks is concealing an even larger deception. In portraying public assistance programs as an incentive “not to work [that hard](#),” Grothman insinuates that [people](#) who [work](#) part-time or [earn](#) so low a wage that they qualify for housing aid and food stamps aren’t doing hard work, or that they are settling for poorly compensated positions rather than chasing better jobs. The comment simultaneously ignores the reality of the modern American labor market — where there are [two job applicants for every opening](#) and most hiring comes from service industry jobs [that pay poverty wages](#) — and hints that people who skulk pots and fry potatoes for \$8 an hour are lazy.

For most of the people Grothman is talking about, working full-time hours in a physically or emotionally demanding service job [doesn't provide enough income to survive](#). [Six out of seven](#) children who get health insurance from the federal government have parents who work. [Six out of seven](#) able-bodied food stamps recipients had a job within a year of their enrollment date, and more than half work while on food stamps. The work requirements that conservatives like Grothman enshrined during the Clinton-era welfare reform push have [made the safety net less effective](#) during recessions when jobs are scarce, but they mean that very few families are getting the sort of free ride the Wisconsin Republican imagines.

The social contract whereby a person's willingness to work hard assured them of basic economic security [has frayed](#). Progressives see that as a reason to raise the minimum wage to restore buying power low-income workers have lost to inflation. But Grothman and several of his fellow anti-safety net conservatives say the solution is instead to spend less money helping poor people (despite the fact that leaving them to fend for themselves is [more expensive for the economy as a whole](#)) and more money encouraging them to get married (even though that [does nothing to cure poverty](#)).