

STANDARD-OF-LIVING FAILURES

Antipoverty Policy for the Excluded Poor

Herbert J. Gans

A tragically large proportion of the officially poor in America are chronically poverty-struck. They remain at the bottom virtually all their lives. Moreover, as this sociologist ably shows, they are typically blamed for their problems. He wants to develop programs that explain rather than blame, as he puts it, as well as policies that can change the course of life for these desperate Americans.

SINCE BILL CLINTON AND THE REPUBLICAN CONGRESS put an end to “welfare as we know it” in 1996, the discussion of poverty and antipoverty policy has focused largely on the working poor, the approximately 20 percent of the officially poor who are employed for twenty-seven weeks a year. Although many earn less than the annual poverty-line income (roughly \$22,000 for a family of four in 2008), they are better off than another, larger, and largely unemployed low-income population: the over 40 percent of all officially poor people

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who earn half or less of the poverty-line income. They need to be included in discussions of poverty and antipoverty policy as well.

Officially described as the severely or extremely poor, they consist primarily of the following:

1. Some very badly paid part-time workers, as well as today's long-term discouraged and long-jobless workers. Many are single men, the younger of them often having dropped out or been pushed out of high school. Others are periodically employed day laborers, joined now by the first victims of the current recession, including the previously working poor, male and female.
2. The incarcerated poor—the young black and Latino males in prison as drug users and low-level workers in the drug industry, many of whom could not find decent legitimate jobs.
3. Old people and single-parent families.
4. The clinical poor—the physically, emotionally, or otherwise disabled or troubled people who need clinical and other medical help.
5. The invisible poor—the people who are not recorded by the census and other public surveys. They may not have family or be known to anyone save some neighbors. Their number and condition therefore remain a mystery.

Many of the people on this list spend their entire lives in extreme poverty. Others earn incomes closer to the poverty line over the years, depending on the state of the economy and the generosity of the larger society, but most never escape totally from poverty.

Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish economist, once called this aggregate of people the “under-class”: “the unemployed, unemployable or underemployed” who are “hopelessly set apart from the nation at large . . . (who) do not share in its life, its ambitions and its achievements” (Myrdal 1963).

However, if a group term is needed, this population should be called the *excluded* poor, which emphasizes their being virtually completely left out of the formal economy and therefore out of the polity and mainstream society as well.

In fact, their exclusion is getting worse. In 1970, before the beginning of the country's upturn in economic inequality, about a quarter of the population below the poverty line was severely poor; in 2007 that proportion had risen to 43 percent.

Other problems associated with severe poverty have been on the rise as well during this period. For example, the proportion of children in one-parent families doubled between 1970 and 2000 and continues to rise, while the proportion in foster care rose by nearly 75 percent between 1982 and 2000. Child abuse reports increased from 4 per 1,000 children in 1975 to 47 in 1996; infant homicide rates more than doubled between 1970 and 2000; and the early school dropout/push-out rate between grades nine and ten tripled from 1970 to 2000. The number of people in prison or jail rose from about 350,000 to 2 million during that period.

To be sure, some of these problems beset the working poor, and all can be found to some extent up and down the class hierarchy. Child abuse is a good example, for children are abused by affluent parents as well, but their activities may not become public knowledge or subject to punishment. Indeed, the poor are sometimes expected to live up to a standard the nonpoor cannot live up to either, but only the poor are punished.

Perhaps the excluded poor should also be called the blamed poor, for they are often condemned for their own poverty and exclusion by failing to follow the rules of mainstream American culture. Poor young men are the main targets of blaming because older adults view them as dangerous. Women are mostly condemned for not living up to a sex code stricter than that now practiced in mainstream America. Only the children, the old, and some of the disabled remain unblamed and are, like the working poor, considered deserving.

Actually, the economically excluded are also likely to be excluded on racial grounds, and proportionally, the largest number of the severely poor are African Americans and Latinos. For example, according to the 2007 U.S. Census, 5 percent of all Americans, 3 percent of non-Hispanic whites, but 11 percent of all blacks live in severe poverty.

Consequently, when people are blamed for being poor and behaving

accordingly, they are usually racialized as well, and their skin colors and ethnicities, whatever they are, threaten mainstream America. Myrdal's "under-class," with the hyphen removed, was later turned into a blaming term applied especially to poor black and Latino men (Gans 1995; Katz 1989). If they were more numerous, poor Native Americans would have been included as well.

America is not the only country with excluded and blamed poor people; in fact, some societies include populations that have been excluded for centuries. They include the *burakumin* of Japan (Howell 1996), the *dalit* (formerly called "untouchables") of India, and various "aborigine" and "indigenous" populations, as in Australia and New Zealand. Many Roma (Gypsies) are in this position in Eastern Europe and elsewhere (Ladanyi and Szelenyi 2006). So are tinkers, their Irish and English equivalents.

These populations have also long been treated as dangerous races, even when there is no phenotypical evidence of their differing from their country's dominant race. Although some of the extremely poor are virtually excluded from the regular economy, such as Australia's aborigines and America's Native Americans, others may be part of the regular economy.

Like poor African Americans and Latinos, some *burakumin* and *dalit*, as well as Roma, do their country's dirty work. In Japan, work with animal skins and leather, including shoe manufacture and repair, is considered dirty work and therefore is assigned to the *burakumin* (DeVos and Wagatsuma 1966).

Roma and tinkers are different; some have developed their own off-the-books economies, while Roma have created a distinctive oppositional way of life that rejects the non-Roma majority as impure (Gmelch 1986).

The United States has its own *burakumin*: severely poor and racialized peoples who have spent long years on the bottom rung of the economy before; principally, of course, during slavery, but also when Chinese "coolies" were placed in roughly the same position.

Yesterday's "coolies" are today's model minority, and slavery is long gone. However, poor African Americans are still being blamed for faults

they were charged with as slaves even though they are even losing the dirty-work jobs they had then. As the gaps between the working and excluded poor widen, severely poor African Americans and dark-skinned Latinos could become a long-term or permanent burakumin stratum at the bottom of America's class and caste structures. New antipoverty policies are needed to prevent this from happening.

What Must Be Done?

Antipoverty policy to benefit the excluded poor should have at least two components. One is an attempt to stop blaming the excluded poor, aiming instead for better explanations and greater public understanding of why they have been excluded. The other policy component is a set of specific economic and other programs that can enable the severely poor to at least obtain incomes at the official poverty line.

Although this discussion begins with the shift from blaming to explaining, the two components need to occur simultaneously, for without a sharp reduction in blaming, specific antipoverty programs will not stand much of a political chance. However, a Catch-22 situation obtains, since until antipoverty programs are effective, many of the nonworking poor will continue to be blamed for their poverty.

Consequently, the politically wisest solution may be to begin with antipoverty programs that target the unblamed among the excluded poor, but meanwhile search for effective "explanatory" programs. For example, since the disabled poor are exempt from blaming, explanatory programs might emphasize that severe poverty is a form of disability that is ultimately brought about by economic and other conditions.

From Blame to Explanation

Professionals, academics, and others involved in policy analysis and diagnosis have their own blaming litany, and it needs to be attacked first. The primary professional blaming idea of the last half century has been the culture of poverty (Lewis 1969). Oscar Lewis described

it as a set of some seventy “traits,” many of which enabled people to adapt to the conditions typically associated with poverty. Other traits were maladaptive because they prevented people from escaping poverty even when opportunities to do so were available, and yet others were pathological, leading to self- and socially destructive acts.

Although Lewis believed only 20 percent of the poor to be trapped in the culture of poverty, the policymakers who adopted his ideas applied them to the majority of the poor. Then they used his theory to lobby against antipoverty programs.

In retrospect, Lewis was correct to point to the recurring pathological effects of poverty, but he was wrong to describe them and his entire set of traits as a culture. Although some traits were inter-related, calling them a culture made it seem as if they were cogs in a machine that was impossible to change or even to stop. Thus, Lewis claimed that poor children internalized the culture as early as age six or seven and were permanently programmed to remain poor for the rest of their lives. In fact, however, the traits were mainly practices or behavior patterns that most people gave up when they could escape from poverty.

If mainstream America can ever be expected to stop blaming the poor for their own poverty, social scientists, journalists, novelists, teachers, and other “public explainers” will have to give mainstream Americans a better picture of what poor people, and especially the excluded poor, are up against. Right now, the media concentrate on the lawbreakers and the handful of people who somehow pull themselves up and out of severe poverty by their bootstraps. Meanwhile, neither the media nor anyone else tells us about the crises and harassments that dominate and upset their everyday lives.

These explainers must also explain the actual causes of the pathological and other maladaptive practices that accompany poverty. If their reports are accompanied by insight and empathy, explanation may begin to lead to greater understanding.

Explanation does not mean justification, however. While lawless poor people should be held responsible for their behavior, explainers should point out that their lawlessness may be partially the result of

the larger society's irresponsibility and unaccountability toward the poor. Such an explanation suggests that anti-crime programs must be combined with those curbing mistreatment of the poor.

What might the explanatory reports, and the narratives on stories based on them, tell us?

First, most of the poor, even the excluded ones, try to pursue the standard American Dream. Although they are accused of being unable to plan, they must spend most of their time and energy to ensure their day-to-day survival as well as responding to frequent and unexpected crises. In addition, they lack opportunities for, and lack opportunities to plan or the resources to do so, and cannot even guess what the future will bring.

Moreover, these crises generate stress. Poor people become sicker than others as a result of stress-related diseases like high blood pressure, stroke, and heart disease. Others respond to stress with familiar but pathological escape mechanisms: chemical means like alcohol and hard drugs as well as disabling depression and psychoses.

Second, the poor want to adhere to the same mainstream or middle-class values as most better-off Americans, but everyday obstacles get in the way. For example, poor young women who become mothers without being married are not immoral but are adapting to the high level of male unemployment that prevents young men from being "marriageable" (Wilson 1987).

Instead, they wait until they can find a breadwinner, which often does not happen until they are in their thirties and may not happen at all (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Social conservatives argue that the women should remain chaste and childless, but most young women do not remain childless, and middle-class women would likely become unmarried mothers if they knew they might never find a partner with a steady job.

The explainers might also point out that single-parent families can be found among more affluent Americans as well. However, they are not counted by public agencies, studied for good and ill effects, or condemned for immorality.

Third, the extremely poor are often surrounded by violence, whether

it is familial abuse, gang conflict, street crime, drug use, or the less visible violence of growing up in troubled families.

Although the perpetrators of violence must be punished, doing so will not eliminate the causes of such behavior. Poor people at the end of their ropes often take their troubles out by abusing those closest at hand. Others find oblivion in addictive materials, but the drug dealers who supply the poor must do their business on the street and are closely watched by the police, unlike the private dealers who supply drugs to the affluent.

Further, when people are mistreated or just disrespected, whether by their families, peers, or various institutions of the larger society, some end up with a low amount of self-respect. Young men sometimes meet the withdrawal of respect with physical violence, especially when the disrespect is intense enough to threaten their fragile self-respect.

Fourth, various practices associated with poverty, including many for which the poor are blamed, may continue and even worsen for generations. When there are not enough jobs for everyone, antipov-erty policies are lacking, and poverty persists or worsens, the behavior patterns that Oscar Lewis (1969) described as a culture persist as well, making it harder for some in every generation to escape poverty. In addition, poor people may be scarred for generations by ancestors who were disturbed, psychotic, or addicted to alcohol or hard drugs.

Social scientists and others have already done much of the needed research to supply the explanatory and other raw materials for telling stories about extreme poverty. Hopefully, such storytelling can alter the public discourse, so that if blaming the poor continues, it is accompanied by blaming the responsible causal forces and agents in the larger society.

Admittedly, stories do not bring about social change, especially those involving changes in the class hierarchy and the distribution of income and wealth. Poverty exists in large part because there are not enough jobs, monies, and other resources to go around once the economically and politically powerful have taken their share. And power means never having to support the needed redistribution of income and wealth.

Yet other stories are needed—for example, about the usefulness of the poor to the rest of society. When people need someone to blame—a seemingly permanent need—the poor are available and are powerless to fight back. In fact, when the social order is also treated as a moral order, the people at the bottom are likely to be considered immoral.

I am under no illusion that empathic explanations of extreme poverty can quickly lead to better public understanding and from there to more effective policies against poverty. Nonetheless, the effort is worth making because it could open a crack in the door that's closed to so many of the poor.

Needed Antipoverty Policy

Antipoverty programs to help the excluded poor ideally should promote their inclusion or reentry into the labor and consumer markets of the larger society and most immediately at least into its working-poor and working-class sectors. These policies should also try to help those unable to work, including the troubled and even the troublemakers, although the latter should be separated as much as possible from people they can victimize or hurt in other ways. Following are some of the specific policies needed.

Jobs and Job Security

Although many of the excluded poor cannot work, those who can are severely poor because they can find only low-wage and part-time work, if they can find work at all. Therefore, the most urgently needed policy to help the excluded poor also calls for the scarcest and politically most widely demanded resource: jobs. If employment is plentiful or if full employment should become possible again, enough jobs would be left over for the excluded poor. Then those who can work can join in the regular labor market on a path out of poverty and at least in the direction of job security.

The severely poor need decent and secure jobs more than anyone else, for the job security they offer is a prerequisite to economic securi-

ty that can then lead to social and emotional security. Admittedly, they will remain near the tail end of the labor queue, and perhaps secure and decently paid jobs will never again be available for everyone. One already tried solution would be special subsidies to employers who hire the extremely poor—provided they do not fire other employees. Another would be to set aside minimum-wage requirements, with federal wage supplements making up the difference—except that setting aside the minimum wage, especially for adult workers, is undesirable on a number of grounds.

The severely poor might stand a better chance in the law-abiding sectors of the off-the-books economy, except when and where they must compete with immigrants, legal and illegal. Since they are rarely considered for “immigrant jobs,” and often would not want to be, they are attracted by or pushed toward the illegal sectors of that economy, particularly, of course, drug selling. Creating enough new jobs so that poor young people can avoid the drug trade adds another challenge to federal job policies.

Perhaps new or unclaimed niches can be found in the economy. Rebuilding housing and infrastructures in areas in which the excluded poor live might be an example, with modern versions of the 1960s community action programs spending the federal government’s money and city hall’s clout. In fact, working where they live and among people they know might help some people with turbulent job histories become regular workers.

Actually, many of the excluded poor are not candidates for regular jobs, and large numbers need supported work. They and others low down in the job queue may need to be supplied with part-time work, and unemployment benefits or other support funds will have to make up at least some of the difference.

Income Supports

On the assumption that any program called welfare is unlikely to be politically acceptable again in the foreseeable future, income-support programs for the working poor, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit

and unemployment insurance, should be available to anyone who has done some work during the year, as well as those discouraged workers who have not found work for several years.

Any other income-support programs that are politically viable should be made available as well. If politically possible, the public definition of disability should be expanded to cover more people. As long as the government reimburses wounded veterans and disaster victims, perhaps someday it will be possible to reimburse victims of disabling poverty. A broad definition of disabling poverty would include people who have never had a chance to obtain the skills needed in the current labor market and those unable to find work that they can live on. In fact, extreme poverty could be viewed as a socially generated disability.

Family allowance programs were not politically viable during the Great Society era, but possibly such programs would be acceptable today, either for all families or for the poor only. Full-time parenthood should be treated as paid work and, in an era when full employment is hard to achieve, a desirable new source of jobs.

Poor parents, whether working or not, should be first in line for financial help for child rearing. Single parents need such help most urgently, either to be home with very young children or to be available for troubled ones. Sometimes, grandmothers or other relatives are available to play second parent, but they should also be paid for their work.

As long as the two-parent family is culturally and politically valued, perhaps combination job-and-income support programs for couples ready to enter into marriage or partnerships could be tried.

Support Systems

Support systems are the people and organizations that help when help is needed. Such systems can be formal—helping agencies and public facilities, for example—and informal, such as relatives, neighbors, and friends. Social science research on informal support systems indicates that they can be significant helpers during illnesses and other crises.

We also know that the poor need larger and stronger personal support systems than the better off have, yet they often have fewer and weaker ones.

Indeed, the extremely poor are sometimes extremely isolated as well, being able to draw on few people, even in the immediate family, for personal support—or on none at all. Some live in families that cannot provide support but instead generate crises for their members. Lacking any kind of compensating support is one reason poor people become clinically poor.

Helping agencies and social workers try to provide substitute support systems, but too often they are outsiders and from a different class. Thus, they supply a different kind of support than self-selected informal supporters do. Perhaps helping agencies can assist people lacking personal support systems to find them in their neighborhoods, for example, in area churches attended by poor area residents.

If jobs and income support can increase economic security, people can be helped to strengthen their own support systems. Among the poor, social capital works best when it is supported by financial capital.

“Saving” the Children

Once upon a time but not so long ago, many people believed that poor children could best escape poverty if they were separated from their parents and peers and transferred to the care of better-off families.

Foster care is one of the last surviving child-saving programs that reflects this kind of thinking, but most experts now agree, and the courts back them up, that children should remain with their parents unless they are being abused or otherwise injured. There is no objection to part-time removal, however, perhaps to day care and early preschool caretakers. In fact, some policymakers hope that these institutions can stop the transmission of poverty to the next generation, at least among children who have not already been damaged by growing up in dysfunctional or pathological households.

The experience with Head Start and similar programs suggests that

many poor children benefit from preschooling, but recent research indicates that the preschooling should really begin shortly after birth (Neuman 2009). Well-educated upper-middle-class parents start talking with and reading to their babies at that time, thereby initiating learning processes that pay off significantly later in informal learning and in school performance.

Most other babies will benefit from such early preschooling, but poor, poorly educated, and overworked parents often lack the informational skills and energy to do the same. People preoccupied with their own problems have an even harder time talking to their babies. Although nursery schools and day care programs now conduct early talking and reading programs, whether they can replace parents, and do so early and completely enough, is uncertain.

Moreover, upper-middle-class baby talk is a first step in an already planned program of schooling all the way to college. Poor parents cannot make such a plan. Indeed, what would they say to babies who could face a future of inadequate schooling and insecure jobs.

Poor children need additional educational and social support in two later stages. First, the advantages of Head Start programs frequently wear off by the third or fourth grade—about the time Oscar Lewis believed children internalize the culture of poverty. Second, poor children often leave school in the ninth grade, whether as dropouts or push-outs. That may be the time when they transfer to the street, learning from and discovering with peers how to adapt to being poor in later life. Such learning may be necessary, but it also reinforces the likelihood that the children will remain poor.

Some poor parents work very hard and against immense odds to keep their teenage children off the streets and to find ways of helping and encouraging them to perform well in school. Most poor children who end up in selective colleges have taken this path to upward mobility. Consequently, experiments to help other parents should be tried.

Programs to keep children away from at least the most destructive lessons of the street are even more important for poor children who are not academically gifted. Many children, poor or not, fall into this

category and therefore need intense preparation for the job markets of the future.

The needed preparatory systems have two prerequisites. One is schools and teachers skilled enough to teach average performers what they need to know. The second is a labor market—and one sufficiently free from both racism and class bias—that offers the youngsters hope of secure, decent jobs so that they feel they have a future that justifies staying in school.

Preventing hopelessness needs to begin early, long before high school. The transition from ninth to tenth grade appears to be especially crucial, and perhaps the students who then leave school ought to have a chance to work as junior interns or apprentices. If jobs that do not violate child labor laws can be created for them, they might then even return to school before going on the adult job market. Still, that job market must have enough jobs to make young people feel hopeful about the future.

One caveat: poor youngsters may need to see enough relatives and other adults obtaining decent jobs and creating familial security before they are themselves willing and able to make the necessary investments of the needed “cultural” and “emotional” capital. Researchers will have to find out whether one generation of familial security is enough and for whom it may take two or even three. Overcoming disturbed ancestors may require several generations.

Many of the suggested programs were tried here and there during the War on Poverty and are now being tried again by comprehensive child-saving programs like the Harlem Children’s Zone. Over the next few years, researchers ought to be able to demonstrate not only which programs are most effective but also whether organizations that cannot control or affect the labor market can make a permanent difference for large numbers of poor kids.

Saving Adults

Churches, professional helping agencies, and government have tried to save severely poor adults in one way or another since time immemo-

rial. Some have specialized in saving clinically poor adults from themselves and each other, and one must assume this effort will continue. In the long run, they should be increasingly successful as psychiatric, medical, and related knowledge and experience multiply.

Two targeted adult-saving programs are badly needed. One should provide rehabilitation for the ever increasing number of poor prisoners who have served their sentences. Since many have been incarcerated for comparatively minor crimes, notably petty drug dealing, released prisoners who have not been permanently damaged by their stay in prison should be viable candidates for rehabilitation. If enough former prisoners become eligible to vote, perhaps the political will to undertake rehabilitation programs will materialize.

Some of the servicemen and women returning from the Middle East wars will also need rehabilitation so that they do not descend into extreme poverty. Many have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and with further experience both in diagnosing and treating this disorder, we may discover that some of the effects of being in prison and enduring extreme poverty resemble PTSD and can be treated similarly.

People Beyond Help

Still, extreme poverty is more than a traumatic disorder, and for now, a significant number of the extremely poor and their communities remain beyond help. People suffer either from the effects of generations of poverty, or from illnesses or pathologies for which there is now no cure, or from being embedded in social structures so destructive that they constantly claim new victims. The increase in rates of poverty-related pathology since the 1970s, noted at the start of this article, suggests this is often the case.

For now, perhaps the most reasonable policy is to try to minimize the hurts that either the people or the social structures will impose on others. However, if the people who are beyond help do not hurt anyone, the best policy may be to intervene minimally in their lives.

Instead of placing them in special projects or dispersing them, the

areas of extreme or concentrated poverty in which they currently live should be improved physically as much as politically possible. The residents should be aided financially as well and supplied with whatever support system help is feasible. Opportunities to work in accessible labor markets—and to get to less accessible ones—should always be available as well.

In growing metropolitan areas, some current areas of concentrated poverty may be gentrified out of existence, and their residents could wind up at the edges of the metropolitan area. In that case, ways to reduce their isolation from the rest of their world may be needed as well.

Conclusion

This article has discussed many possible programs. In the process it has pretended that resources, knowledge, and the power to obtain both are freely available. It has also ignored the racial barriers that further exclude the extremely poor.

Determining what can actually be done and what ought to be done first requires strategic rather than programmatic analysis. One possibility is to maintain the current policy focus on the working poor in the hope that blaming the poor for their own poverty will be sufficiently reduced either to help those unable to work or to find work that will support them. Another is to create new conceptions of welfare that support people who are unable to work or find work but are not disabled. These are micro solutions, but it is also possible to think of antipoverty programs for the excluded poor that are part of a much larger, longer-range program for economic and other kinds of equalization, targeting much of the population with below-median incomes.

However, the danger of creating a permanently excluded stratum of extremely poor and mostly dark-skinned people, an American caste of quasi-untouchables, is more immediate. Planning to prevent this possibility is necessary now. How the plans can be realized may have to wait until the times are economically and politically right.

For Further Reading

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