

POVERTY IN AMERICA: CREATING OPPORTUNITY

America has always been considered the land of opportunity. Unfortunately, our welfare system has become one that can discourage those who want to make better lives for themselves and their families. Many current poverty programs encourage individuals to stay on welfare instead of joining the workforce, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and preventing them from reaching their full potential. This brief covers what human creativity can accomplish in a free-market economy regarding the issue of poverty.

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History: How did we get here?

KEY FACTS

U.S. taxpayers have spent \$22 trillion on anti-poverty programs since the War on Poverty started in 1965.

14.8% (46 million people) remain in poverty today, about the same level as 1965.

The federal government operates 122 different anti-poverty programs with an annual budget of \$650 million.

As Paul Ryan points out in his **Expanding Opportunity in America** report, “A key tenet of the American Dream is that where you start off shouldn’t determine where you end up...if you work hard and play by the rules, you should get ahead. But the fact is, far too many people are stuck on the lower rungs. Of all Americans raised in the bottom fifth, 34 percent stay there. And just 38 percent make it to the middle class or above. In fact, rates of upward mobility are no lower or higher today than in the 1970s.”

One third of all Americans receive benefits from at least one welfare program, according to the U.S. Census.

Historically, America has taken care of its poor by helping them to improve their circumstances. But the goal was to get people out of poverty, not keep them trapped in it. As **Thomas West of The Heritage Foundation** writes “America has always had laws providing for the poor. The ultimate goal for the Founders was lifting the poor out of poverty as quickly as possible and preventing permanent dependence.”

Even Franklin Roosevelt – whose New Deal laid the foundation for today’s welfare programs by establishing the Aid to Dependent Children program in 1935 – said welfare could tear apart the American spirit, stating that, “continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole our relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit.”

The intention of government’s assistance to the poor was never meant to keep them trapped in poverty, yet many of today’s programs do just that. The U.S. government has spent \$22 trillion over the past 50 years, yet the poverty rate remains at 14.8%, virtually unchanged since 1965. So if current policy is not working, how can we increase opportunity and upward mobility for all?

Framing the Issue

In 1965 President Lyndon Johnson declared the War on Poverty and since then U.S. taxpayers have spent approximately \$22 trillion on 122 anti-poverty programs, more than three times the cost of all military wars since The Revolutionary War. However, the number of Americans living under the poverty threshold has hovered stubbornly around 15%.

Facts to Know

- The Federal Government spends over \$650 billion annually on 122 different anti-poverty programs (including Medicaid), which is approximately **19% of the federal budget**.
- One third of all Americans receive benefits from at least one welfare program, according to the U.S. Census.
- Only one nation (Norway) spends more per person than the U.S. spends on social welfare.
- In 2008, food stamp enrollment was below 30 million and cost \$40 billion. By 2013, enrollment rose to 47.6 million, costing \$80 billion. In 2016, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (commonly referred to as food stamps) cost **\$78 billion**. The federal government spent \$373 billion total on welfare programs (excluding Medicaid costs). As of January 2017, food stamp enrollment has dipped slightly, to approximately **43 million**.
- In 2015, state and local governments spent \$162 billion on antipoverty programs in FY 2015; \$49 billion on welfare programs and \$113 billion on Medicaid. (**FederalSafetyNet.com**)
- As of 2014, **14.8% of the population** remained in poverty (46.7 million Americans), close to the same percentage as in 1965

- According to the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**, the following are the poverty guidelines for 2017:
 - \$12,060 is the threshold for an individual
 - \$16,240 is the threshold for a couple
 - \$24,600 is the threshold for a family of four

Problems with the Current System of Anti-Poverty Programs

Anti-poverty programs suffer from duplication and overlap across agencies which cause inefficiencies and waste. For example:

- There are **33 federal housing programs** run by four different cabinet departments.
- Six federal government cabinet departments and five independent agencies oversaw 27 cash or general assistance programs in 2011.
- In 2011 The **CATO Institute reported** that eight different health care programs were administered by five separate agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services.
- **Medicaid made \$14.4 billion improper payments** in 2013.
- The Government Accountability Office reports that despite great progress, “the amount of SNAP benefits paid in error is substantial, totaling about \$2.2 billion in 2009,” according to **FreedomWorks**.
- Additionally, a report compiled by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) **stated** that, “the 18 food assistance programs show signs of program overlap, which can create unnecessary work and lead to inefficient use of resources.”
- **Administrative costs** for SNAP equals about \$5.5 billion per year, or about 10 percent of the value of food stamps distributed
- In 2014 the Social Security Administration **improperly paid \$5.1 billion in Supplemental Security Income (SSI)**; Department of Labor **improperly paid \$5.6 billion in Unemployment Insurance**; IRS **improperly paid an estimated \$17.7 billion in Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** payments.

We are spending extraordinary amounts of taxpayer money on fighting poverty. In particular, here are key programs that constitute the Safety Net.

What is the Safety Net?

According to **Federal Safety Net**, The Social Safety Net (Safety Net) of the United States is made up of various Welfare Programs that protect low-income Americans from poverty and hardship. The theory is that by catching Americans if they fall on hard times, Americans of sound body and mind can get back on their feet. For those individuals without sound body and mind, the Safety Net protects them with a minimum standard of living. These Safety Net programs are “non-contributory transfer payment programs”, meaning low-income Americans don’t have to contribute into the programs to receive benefits.

Thirteen categories of Federal Welfare Programs are shown on the **Safety Net Programs Page**. State Programs and non-profit organizations also make up the Social Safety Net available to Americans. These programs vary by location and typically include food, housing, counseling and other benefits.

The term Social Safety Net is also used in a broader context to mean any program that provides benefits to individuals or families, including Social Security, Medicare and Unemployment. In this context the Safety Net is made up of both contributory and non-contributory programs. In order to receive Social Security and Medicare, Americans must pay into the programs for years. This is also partially true with unemployment but with the extension of benefits in recent years the program is now in large part non-contributory. For more information on the major anti-poverty Safety Net programs, click below:

1. 1965 – Medicaid : Medicaid is a joint federal-state program designed to provide health coverage to low-income families, single mothers, and disabled individuals through coordinated federal and state efforts. One third of all federal safety net spending goes to Medicaid spending.

2. 1976 – Key Components of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC): EITC provides cash assistance to low-income working families, it was designed to offset Social Security taxes and to do so in a way that encouraged work.

3. 1996 – Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): The 1996 Welfare Reform law replaced Roosevelt’s program that was born out of the great depression (Aid to Families with Dependent Children – AFDC) with fixed annual grants to states under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families – TANF program.

4. 2002 – Applying TANF successes to Food Stamp (SNAP) and Housing Assistance

5. 2014 Opportunity Grant Proposal – consolidating programs and sending them to the states: This is a proposal that would create a pilot program to coordinate aid for families in need. By allowing states and community groups to test different ways of fighting poverty, federal aid will help people not just avoid hardship—but build a career and thus a path to self-reliance.

Factors that Lead to Poverty

Those living in poverty are often cut off from three crucial sources of support: *education, work, and family*.

- They’re less likely to have graduated from high school. Education spending per pupil has nearly tripled over the past four decades with largely stagnant achievement **to show for it**.
- They’re less likely to work full-time. Our economic policies are not making it easier to find full time jobs. Male labor-force participation has fallen to **record lows**.
- And they’re less likely to have gotten married before they had kids. If a person works full-time, gets a high-school education, and waits until he or she is married to have children, the chances of being poor are **just 3 percent**.

The Four Types of Poverty

Expert Robert Woodson of The Woodson Center (formerly known as Center for Neighborhood Enterprise) outlines four categories of poverty, which help in understanding how different types of poverty require different solutions. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution for eradicating poverty for each of these groups. Woodson’s **testimony** on poverty before the U.S. House Committee on the Budget outlines the following categories:

1. **Unexpected setback** – loss of job, home, spouse or other supporting family members. “Due to circumstances beyond their control—such as job loss, their factory’s closure, or illness of a breadwinner—this group has fallen into poverty. Assistance to them serves as a bridge back to economic stability. They use government programs as originally intended: as an ‘ambulance service’ not as a transportation system.”
2. **Stuck in the poverty trap** – generations trapped in a vicious cycle from which there seems no escape. “Those whose character and values are intact but have not moved out of dependency on government assistance because they have ‘done the math’ regarding the benefits of the welfare system and have reasoned that the disincentives for becoming independent outweigh the incentives. They know that as they earn or save money, their benefits will be reduced or terminated. In the case of one single mother in Milwaukee, saving \$5,000 over time from her welfare assistance to help with her daughter’s college tuition resulted in her being charged with a felony.”
3. **People with disabilities and suffering of mentally illnesses**, many of whom will always be in need of some support. Our aging population may fall in this category.
4. **People suffering of alcoholism, addictions and others** who choose or fell into this way of life. “Those who are poor because of the chances they take and the bad choices they made. They are people who indulge in self-destructive behavior and have serious character deficits. Giving “no-strings” assistance to this group enables them to continue their self-destructive lifestyles and injures with the helping hand. For this group, intervention is a necessary precondition for assistance so that they move to the ranks of Category 1, where assistance and opportunities can be a stepping stone toward self-sufficiency and upward mobility.”

In order to help Americans in the first two groups, anti-poverty programs must align with the American tradition of improving one’s place within, and contribution to, society by incentivizing work, education, family and positive role models.

To get a better sense of what circumstances might lead to poverty, the table below outlines examples of these first two categories:

Situational Poverty	Generational Poverty
Andrea is a 24-year-old woman. She has two children ages four and two. Her husband left the family six months ago, and she does not know how to contact him.	Steven is a single 19-year-old male and the father of one child, age 3. He does not have custody or pay child support. He has not seen the child in over a year.
Andrea graduated from high school. Her only work experience was a two-year stint in retail when she was 18. After she got married, her husband was the sole breadwinner for the family.	Steven lives with his 38-year-old mother and 55-year-old grandmother in his grandmother's subsidized two-bedroom apartment; he sleeps on the couch. Both his mother and grandmother were single parents, and he does not know his father. His older brother, age 20, is in prison.
She and her children now live with her parents in a two-bedroom mobile home. Her parents can't support her or the children over the long haul.	Steven's grandmother receives disability payments, and his mother occasionally picks up odd jobs for cash. They have been welfare recipients throughout his life.
Andrea has been trying to find work for the last five months. She doesn't have a car and can't afford child care.	Steven has a history of substance abuse but checked into a treatment program three months ago. Both his mother and grandmother use drugs, and Steven says he needs to get away from that environment to stay sober. He is currently unemployed, and he did not graduate from high school. He would like to attend college and eventually get joint custody of his child.

Source: Budget Committee Report, **Expanding Opportunity in America**

Notably, **work incentives and time limits are not the correct focus for the third and fourth categories.** For the third category, our population with disabilities needs a reliable safety net in place that is not abused by misuse and fraud.

For the fourth category to move out of poverty, they must have a personal desire and commitment to get their life back on track. The fourth category requires constant, long-term and personalized attention from leaders within their community. Some examples of these programs are featured in **"Comeback"**, a series of short 10 minute videos produced by Opportunity Lives and The Woodson Center.

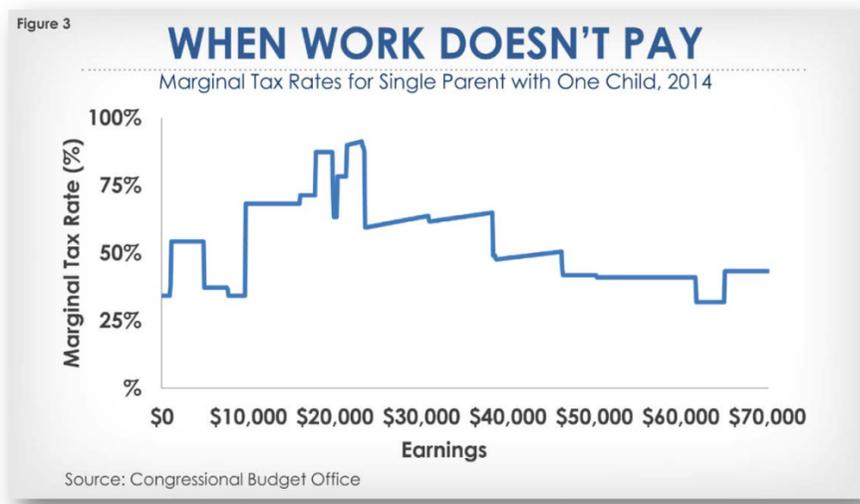
What is the Poverty Trap?

People fall into the "poverty trap" when the gap between what they earn at a job and what they can get from the government by not working is so small that work becomes not worth doing. In other words, government offers just enough support to keep people from destitution but then penalizes them for working to better themselves. For a five minute overview of the poverty trap, view **this five minute clip** produced by Prager University.

Speaker of the House Paul Ryan draws attention to the causes and implications of the poverty trap in an effort to fix the problem through welfare reform. He has highlighted the "little to no coordination among" the myriad government programs and explained that because of "the way these programs are structured, families become ineligible for them as they make more money—so poor families face very high marginal tax rates, in some cases over 80 percent. Government actually discourages them from making more money."

This **trap** is a **high marginal tax rate** that occurs because people are losing large government benefits *and* paying more taxes as they earn more income. The **marginal tax rate** is the percent of tax you pay on an additional dollar of income.

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Example 1, for an eligible taxpayer (or couple) with two or more children, the benefit received through the Earned Income Tax Credit declines by 21 cents for each dollar earned above the prior year's income, imposing an implicit marginal tax rate of 21% on recipients' increased wages.

- **Example 2**, for a single mother with two children living in Colorado whose income jumps from \$10,000 to \$40,000, she will not keep much of that extra \$30,000. Instead, she will lose most of it to higher taxes *and* benefit cuts. If she is enrolled in programs like food stamps, Medicaid, and SCHIP, her marginal tax rate on each additional dollar earned will be as high as 55 percent. And if she is enrolled in other programs—like housing assistance and welfare—the marginal rate will rise above 80 percent.

Means testing is utilized to determine who qualifies for government benefits at lower income thresholds. Once an individual's means exceeds an established level, they receive fewer benefits thus creating a disincentive for work. Making more money should help Americans to break free from poverty. Instead, current policy encourages them to stay in it.

What Role Should Government Play?

*"The question isn't **whether** the federal government should help. The question is **how**."*

– Speaker Paul Ryan

Historically, government has played a role in alleviating poverty and must continue to do so. Poverty policies and programs tend to reflect the values of policy makers. Policies to lead to sustainable long-term poverty should center around these core ideas:

- “Where you start should not determine where you end up,” as noted by Speaker Ryan.
- Work is an opportunity for everyone to add value, including those with physical and intellectual disabilities. Through work, people feel needed and valued, become part of a community and learn responsibility.
- Children should see the value and reward of hard work to better their lives and help break the generational cycle of poverty.
- Everyone has a different definition of what is a “good job”. Regardless of the job, humans should be treated with respect and dignity. As Colin Powell wrote in his autobiography **My American Journey** “All work is honorable.”
- “The poor are assets that can be developed, not liabilities to be managed,” as pointed out by Arthur Brooks.

So, with these values as an outline, what role should government play?

Some favor an approach that emphasizes improving the immediate material living conditions of people in poverty and reducing income differences. Success in the war on poverty is viewed in terms of numbers of people being helped and how many aggressive programs that equalize income to reduce poverty, including:

- Increasing the minimum wage
- Extending long-term unemployment benefits
- Spending more money on current and new programs to fight poverty
- Higher tax rates to high earners to fund additional safety net programs

Yet others believe policies must encourage people in poverty to seek work to improve their lives and incentivize businesses to hiring those with fewer skills, disabilities or who need a new start so they can start on a path to self-reliance. To move out of poverty, people need work opportunities where they can experience “earned success” as noted by **Arthur Brooks of AEI**. It is interesting to note:

- Only 16 % of part-time workers are considered poor, and 3% of full-time workers, compared with **34 % of adults who do not work**.
- To provide these work opportunities, economic growth is key. According to Michael Tanner of The CATO Institute, the policy focus should be “**less on making poverty comfortable**, and more on creating the prosperity that will get people out of poverty.”

Entitlement programs, such as unemployment benefits and food stamps, over an extended period of time undermine self-sufficiency and disincentivize participation in the work force. In **testimony before the House Committee on Budget, Bob Woodson** of The Woodson Center explains that there are those in poverty who have “reasoned that the disincentives for becoming independent outweigh the incentives. They know that as they earn or save money, their benefits will be reduced or terminated.”

One outcome of an increased **minimum wage** is a cut in employee hours and a potential turn toward automated services. One example of automation underway is in the **restaurant industry**. The **Bureau of Labor Statistics** states that in 2014, 58.7 percent of all wage and salary workers were paid at hourly rates. Among those paid by the hour, 3.0 million workers with wages at or below the federal minimum made up 3.9 percent of all hourly paid workers. Also, 50% of workers earning minimum wage are under 25 years old. Almost two-thirds of workers earning the minimum wage or less in 2014 were employed in service occupations, mostly in food preparation and service-related jobs. Often these are entry level jobs that give people valuable work experience and function as a stepping stone to other work opportunities.

Recently, some **policy-makers have called** for “consolidating many of our federal poverty programs into flexible programs, that include work incentives, that go to our states to customize a welfare benefit for person’s particular need.” This approach utilizes evidence-based analysis to track the impact of anti-poverty programs, and adjust accordingly. Government programs are more efficient, effective and accountable when they are designed and implemented closest to the people they aim to assist. This means poverty programs should be designed at the state and local levels where programs can be targeted to the needs and outcomes within communities.

According to Speaker Ryan, “The problem isn’t that Washington is letting people keep too much of their own money. The problem is that Washington is holding too many people back.”

Principles of Reform

- **A strong economy provides opportunity.** As outlined in the The Policy Circle Economic Growth Brief, business and entrepreneurship represent the largest and most successful anti-poverty program in human history. It is essential to re-open avenues for entrepreneurship as a component of combating poverty.
- **Empower the states and communities who are on the front lines.** The role of federal government should be coordinated, targeted, evidence-based and in line with the **10th amendment of The United States Constitution**. The role of the federal government is to act as a referee, not a player. Individuals, communities and states, in that order, are the key power players that can truly break down barriers to opportunity and make the Safety Net more effective. As Speaker Ryan has stated, “far too often, federal aid is fragmented and formulaic; it doesn’t coordinate these services to help people achieve their goals – But there *are* organizations with intimate knowledge of the people they serve and a long-term view that do provide such comprehensive assistance. They are more effective than distant federal bureaucracies for a simple reason: They don’t just relieve the pain of poverty; they give people the means to get out of poverty.”
- **Designing the programs at the local level** instead of from Washington, allows the assistance to be tailored to fit the needs of those in poverty. For example, the private, community-based organization **The Woodson Center** provides effective community and faith-based organizations with training and technical assistance, links them to sources of support, and evaluates their experiences for public policy. The Woodson Center has provided training to more than 2,600 leaders of community organizations in 39 states and helps community residents deal with issues such as youth violence,

substance abuse, teen pregnancy, homelessness, joblessness, family dissolution, poor education, and deteriorating neighborhoods. A 10 minute video from the “Comeback” series explains:

Comeback Episode 5 - Untapped Potential



- These frontline groups experience success when:
 - Individuals decide that they want to pull themselves out of poverty.
 - Community leaders are focused on turning individual ambition and commitment into opportunity.
 - States are the avenue for connecting taxpayer dollars with community leaders, effective groups, and targeted programs.
- **A hand up, not an unlimited hand out.** Work requirements and temporary benefits designed to give everyone the chance they need to succeed, if they are willing to work for it. Currently, waivers exist for most states which has taken away this work incentive.
- **Analysis and Accountability.** The federal government’s role should be to track metrics and provide accountability of the funds. This is the goal of the **Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act** that passed the House and Senate and was signed by President Obama in 2016. The federal government is in a position to act as the referee, setting benchmarks, publishing results and ensuring that states are not misusing taxpayer funds.

Examples of Innovative Solutions

Following are some examples of innovative government and non-government solutions:

- **Wage supplement:** Doug Holtz-Eakin, **Poverty Reduction Opportunity Wage**. Proposal’s aim is to “configure a wage subsidy so that if a person works full time they will not be in poverty. The PRO Wage does exactly that. If a person (or couple) works full time for the year, the labor earnings are guaranteed to exceed the federal poverty line.”
- **Housing: Shelters to Shutters** assists the homeless, veterans, and domestic violence victims interview for entry level property management positions which offer discounted on-site housing.

- **Violence:** In Congressional **testimony**, Bob Woodson talks about a Milwaukee-based program – under the umbrella of The Woodson Center – called the **Violence-Free Zone (VFZ) initiative**. The initiative is reducing violence and disruptions in 12 Milwaukee public schools and is preparing students in the most disadvantaged communities to learn and to succeed.
- **Return on investment:** Based on a study done by **Civic Enterprises**, an annual federal investment of \$6.4 billion a year in proven existing federal programs – like AmeriCorps, Back on Track Schools, Public Allies, Service and Conservation Corps, or YouthBuild programs – would reconnect one million young adults per year. Each 20-year-old permanently reconnected to education and/or employment will directly save the taxpayer \$236,000 and will save a total social cost of \$704,000 over his or her lifetime. Thus, if these programs succeed with just half of their participants, the lifetime direct return on investment to the taxpayer would be over \$118 billion for each year of investment. The social benefit would be \$350 billion. (National Council of Young Leaders)
- **Temporary support for families in crisis:** **Safe Families** operates in 70 cities in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and other countries, to provide temporary support for families in crises due to unemployment, homelessness and other challenges, with the goal of keeping children safe and out of the foster care system and able to reunite with their families after the crisis has passed. Safe Families matches children with volunteers host families and provides coaching and other resources.
- **Reducing recidivism:** Often those re-entering society from prison face living in poverty and the challenges that accompany it. The **Dannon Project** is a community-based program in Birmingham, AL, that helps people struggling with re-entry to society, especially non-violent offenders from prison. The program was founded by Jeh Jeh Pruitt and his wife, Kerri Pruitt, after Dannon Pruitt, Jeh Jeh's youngest brother, was killed by a person who recently had been released from prison on a non-violent offense. Speaker Ryan **recently referred to** this program as an example of how community-based programs get results – only 3% of the programs participants return to prison, compared with a state average of 44% percent.

A word from those well-acquainted with poverty

The **National Council of Young Leaders** was formed in July 2012 in response to a recommendation of the White House Council on Community Solutions, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Open Society Foundations. Following are the principles of action developed by this council comprised of people who at one time faced poverty and neglect and who make it clear that fighting poverty is not the job of a large, cold bureaucracy. The young community leaders who were selected to serve on the council by sponsoring organizations overcame numerous hardships including “child abuse, rapidly changing and sometimes abusive or neglectful foster care placements, homelessness, traumatic loss and suffering of family members through murder or the impact of chronic and fatal diseases, discrimination based on our race or ethnicity, gang violence, the absence of our fathers through murder or incarceration, the loss of our mothers through suicide or drug overdose, neighborhoods that were unsafe for children to even walk to school, teachers who told us we were doomed to fail, schools that kicked us out, public policies affecting Native Americans that prevented our tribes from building the infrastructure needed to support our people, police who stereotyped us and overlooked the rampant drug dealing surrounding us, and prison records that will follow us for the rest of our lives and lock many doors to us.”

Their principles for action, included in **this report**, are:

- **“Love.** Action for change must be grounded in love, led by moral and spiritual consciousness, to transform societies and individuals.
- **Responsibility.** We must lead by example, taking responsibility and being accountable to others and to ourselves for all of our actions, knowing that we must be role models for our peers.
- **Forgiveness and empathy.** We must forgive others and ourselves, with empathy, understanding the full reality faced by all of us.
- **Community empowerment.** We must empower our peers and the residents in our communities to overcome their feelings of powerlessness, apathy, and fear, to work together proactively to create stronger communities in which everyone is committed to everyone else’s well being, where we take care of each other, correct each other, and love each other. We must organize, vote, become active, and take charge and responsibility for our lives and communities.
- **Inclusion.** We must be inclusive, refusing to stereotype any group of people or any individual.
- **Visibility.** We must make ourselves visible, tell our stories and our truth to influential people who are uninformed and insulated from the twin oppressions of poverty and racism. We believe if they truly hear us, many of them will care and join with us. We must equally become visible to other young people who need to see that it is possible to transcend the obstacles they face and to find pathways to productive citizenship.
- **Collaboration.** We must encourage more collaboration and less competition among nonprofits that have been pressured by resource shortages to be in competition for limited funds. We need them to be in collaboration to expand the resources, and to share their knowledge and resources with each other, on our behalf.
- **Accountability for results.** We must be willing to look critically at results, asking programs that we support to track demographics, outcomes, and return on investment.
- **Respect for faith.** We must respect each other’s sources of faith and spirituality, accepting differences and welcoming the strength that comes from different religious faiths.
- **Humility.** We must remain humble and committed, remembering that good works are always in service to others, not to promote our own careers.
- **Planning.** We must take seriously the responsibility to plan and move systematically toward our individual futures and the futures of our organizations and our world.”

As part of this effort, a focus must be put on reducing out-of-wedlock births, building healthy, two-parent families, and increasing the number of positive role models.

What You Can Do

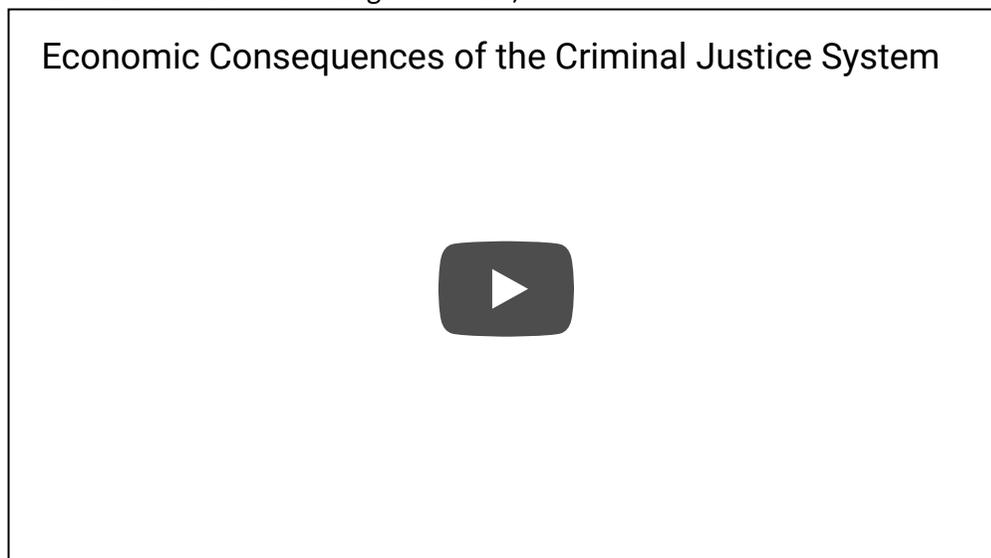
“In order to have a real impact, we have to encourage everyone to get involved. For too long, too many people have watched this effort from a distance. They’ve said to themselves: “I’m working hard. I’m paying my taxes. Government is going to take care of this.” And in so many ways, government is encouraging this view. Well, that doesn’t cut it. We need everyone to get in the game. We need everyone to get involved—person to person.”

— Speaker of the House Paul Ryan

What You Can Do

Research the committees on which your Senators and Representatives serve. Search the Members' websites and their Committee websites to investigate his/her level of engagement on efforts to address poverty and welfare reform.

- Write to your Senators and Representative to ask for information on local leaders in your district/state when it comes to addressing poverty. Ask them about consolidating safety net programs into flexible, accountable grants to states.
- Get involved with a local community organization and ask your elected officials to highlight successful examples of breaking the cycle of poverty at the local level.
- Highlight a local community organization success story in an Op Ed in your local paper and call on your Senators and Representative to support the most efficient role for federal government involvement in reducing poverty by consolidating anti-poverty programs into flexible and accountable grants to the states.
- Take opportunities when related articles (on economic decline, inequality, lack of access to loans for entrepreneurs etc.) appear in your local paper to write a letter to the editor.
- Post short facts or timely articles on these topics and tweet @yourrepresentative. **Post these** on The Policy Circle website as well!
- Criminal Justice Reform, Education Reform (see briefs [here](#) and [here](#)), and Regulatory Reform are also necessary if we are going to break down all barriers to opportunity. Keep up with current and upcoming briefs to stay active in the conversation.
- See AEI Resident Fellow Gerard Robinson's "**Prisoner Reentry and Why We Should Care**" **video** (1:18).
- See Arthur Brooks' comments on the economic consequences of the criminal justice system (below, 36:18 – Brooks' comments begin at 8 min.)



- It usually takes various calls and a stack of letters coming into a congressional office, along with an uptick in interest in the local paper, for a Member of Congress to take note of an issue that they

aren't currently focused on. Teach your friends and colleagues about this topic, create a social media hashtag and tell them how to get involved as well.

- Browse the innovative solutions and organizations listed below that are pioneering new tactics for alleviating poverty!

Thought Leaders & Key Players in Congress

Thought Leaders

Robert Doar, American Enterprise Institute

Bob Woodson, Center for Neighborhood Enterprise

Ron Haskins, Brookings Institution

Scott Winship, Manhattan Institute

Michael Strain, American Enterprise Institute

Michael D. Tanner, Cato Institute

Key Players in Congress

In addition to Speaker Ryan, freshman **Congressman Mark Walker (R-NC)** is an outspoken leader in tackling poverty. He created the Health, Opportunity, Poverty, and Education (HOPE) Commission in North Carolina, a “nonpartisan, volunteer board” that enlists non-profit and community leaders in the district to tackle issue that face the “underserved and underprivileged.”

Republican Members of the Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility Task Force – the goal is to strengthen our safety net and reform educational programs to make them more effective and accountable, help people move from welfare to work, and empower productive lives.

Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway (R-TX)

Budget Committee Chairman Tom Price (R-GA)

Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN) Financial Services Committee Chairman Jeb Hensarling (R-TX)

Ways & Means Committee Chairman Kevin Brady (R-TX)

Democrat Members: Senate Budget Committee Chairman Patty Murray (D-WA) has worked on bipartisan issues to address poverty along with and Representatives Jim McGovern (D-MA) and Barbara Lee (D-CA) .

Additional Resources

- **Arthur Brooks' Ted Talk** calling for innovative solutions and for conservatives and liberals to work together to lift more people out of poverty.
- Map of State by State poverty statistics and policies– Spotlight on Poverty
- AEI/Brookings Bipartisan Poverty Report 2015
- National Council of Young Leaders Report – Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America 2012
- Expanding Opportunity in America – A discussion draft from the House Budget Committee. Paul Ryan reform agenda 2014
- The War on Poverty: 50 Years Later – A House Budget Committee Report 2014
- Quick facts – Federal Safety Net and **Welfare Reform**
- AEI Resident Fellow Gerard Robinson, “**Help Ex-Inmates Lead Productive Lives**”
- Wilson Shaheen **Lab for Economic Opportunities**
 - “**Emergency Assistance Prevents Homelessness**”
 - “**Reading for Life**” Policy Brief
 - **STC Project Summary**

Questions for Discussion

- What is the number one poverty issue you think should be addressed?
- What role should the federal, state, local governments and civic organizations should play in addressing poverty?
- If changes to poverty really happen at the local, individual level – what can we do as part of our day job or normal routine to have a positive impact?
- How can our federal government representatives take specific action to make \$650 billion each year spent on ending poverty produce better outcomes?
- What steps can we take to build a coalition that highlights the good anti-poverty activity in our communities, in order to make sure more funds are spent on proven programs?
- What should be the policy priorities about the Safety Net?
- What key fact about poverty in America or your state that touched you?
- What are the prevailing views about poverty in your community?
- What do your representatives say about addressing poverty?
- What would you add to this portrait of poverty in America or your state? Are there other aspects we've not yet discussed or considered?
- What can you do influence the debate?

