

Poverty & Race

POVERTY & RACE RESEARCH ACTION COUNCIL

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Comments on the Center for American Progress Task Force on Poverty Report:
Recommendations that Don't Work

by Margy Waller

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A review of The Center for American Progress' Task Force on Poverty report begins—and ends—with the report's title: From Poverty to Prosperity: A National Strategy to Cut Poverty in Half.

Others may have a detailed analysis of the task force policy recommendations. But because the report is premised on a goal to cut poverty, these recommendations will have little impact. If CAP had developed a different title and goal, there would be more payoff from the organizational endorsement of this set of proposals.

As it is, utilizing a goal to end poverty probably dooms the rest of the report, because it won't work.

A policy framework that slices and dices beneficiaries creates an "other," violating the big idea that we are all in this together. Rather than arguing to fix the economy for a distinct class—the poor—our narrative should describe an economy that works for all of us.

There are three problems with the poverty goal.

First, poverty is a flawed measure for assessing progress toward desired outcomes, including many of the report's proposals. As a result, a goal to "halve poverty" is both limited and limiting. CAP copied this initiative from the UK, where Tony Blair established a similar goal in 1999, but the definition and public understanding of poverty are vastly different in the UK than in the US, making the UK model difficult to transfer across the Atlantic.

Poverty in the UK is measured using absolute and relative measures of income and also by a material deprivation measure (added to ensure that families do not fall too far behind the rest in meeting material needs), all supporting an official national plan for social inclusion. In the US, the official poverty formula uses only an absolute measure of

income deprivation based on household budgets in the 1950s. Since poverty signifies something quite narrow in our country, we need a new framework for the kind of multi-dimensional policy proposals in the CAP report.

Second, public understanding of the causes and remedies for poverty hinders adoption of the very policy solutions outlined in the CAP report. While advocates point to opinion surveys showing public support for “helping the needy,” such arguments overlook the limitations of opinion polling. If the public support were indeed this strong, Congress would have acted accordingly long ago.

The limitations of the support identified by the polls are significant. Too many people believe that people are poor because of bad decisions or personal moral failing. While the percentage agreeing with such statements can shift depending on how the question is worded and where it falls in the survey, the agreement is so strong across surveys over time that it’s folly to wrap policy proposals in a goal to reduce poverty.

In a recent Pew survey, 7 of 10 people agreed that the poor are too dependent on government assistance. And a review of the opinion surveys after the 1996 changes in federal welfare law finds as much as half the public is inclined to blame individual “lack of effort” for poverty, as many or more than before the law changed. It turns out that welfare changes didn’t undermine conservative arguments after all.

Third, by defining the problem as “poverty,” the CAP report opens the door to a losing scenario for policymaking. The media simplifies these debates and portrays them as two competing proposals. My crystal ball predicts proposals like these in any Congressional debate over the best way to cut poverty in half:

- 1) The Law to Halve Poverty Over Ten Years with good schools, universal pre-k, financial education, expanded tax credits and Pell Grants, health coverage for all, expanded food stamps and childcare, indexed minimum wage, unions; and
- 2) Making Poverty History Act, stressing marriage and work.

Conservatives would demolish the first, comprehensive proposal because it goes far beyond the stated goal of raising income above the poverty line (about \$20,000 for a family of 4), and the public won’t support such spending proposals if they believe people are poor due to personal failures.

The CAP report and goal sets up a debate about “personal responsibility” that will feel sadly familiar to anyone who followed the evolution of welfare legislation in the last decade. We should develop policy goals by consulting the research evidence and anticipating the debate’s impact on policy outcomes and public understanding.

Progressives have already lost on the issues of poverty and “personal responsibility.” It’s time to recast the goal as one of economic mobility and social inclusion. CAP missed an opportunity by sticking to an old—and failed—framework for this debate. The

progressive agenda and political campaigns of the near and longer term will benefit greatly if CAP would expend its considerable expertise and resources on developing an alternative lens designed to build broad public support for these policy solutions.

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