

Debunking the pathology of poverty

Paul Ryan revives misguided argument that the poor are to blame for their struggles
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The House Budget Committee's March 3 report, "[The War on Poverty: 50 Years Later](#)," states that "the single most important determinant of poverty is family structure," closely followed by a disinclination to work. The sponsor of the report, Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wisc., claims the problem is single-parent households raising children with neither the desire nor capacity to acquire skills to support themselves as adults — creating a vicious cycle of dependency persisting across generations. He blames government-sponsored social programs for permitting the lazy among us to avoid taking responsibility for themselves and their children, and he believes the cure for this self-inflicted condition is tough love: Poor people need stronger incentives to get off the couch and find a job.

In a radio chat with Bill Bennett, drug czar under George H.W. Bush and secretary of education under Ronald Reagan, Ryan seemed to inject race into the argument, saying, "We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the culture of work." Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Calif., called it racist. The New York Times columnist and Nobel laureate economist Paul Krugman [agreed](#), calling Ryan's reference to inner cities an obvious "dog whistle" — a coded, offensive message understood by a targeted few.

Ryan traces his ideas about family structure to the 1965 Moynihan Report, written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant secretary in the Department of Labor and later a U.S. Senator from New York. Moynihan argued that poverty is perpetuated by defective cultural values, an idea more generally known as the culture of poverty. That term was coined in 1959 by Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist, and was used repeatedly by Michael Harrington, a popular journalist who wrote about American poverty, but as a theory it was heavily disputed by most social scientists until the mid-1980s. With the rise of conservative politics and periodic declines in the economy, this allegedly

scientific concept has repeatedly served as a convenient explanation for persistent inequality, a state of affairs that benefits the wealthy and the politicians who serve their interests. Instead of plumbing the pathologies of elite culture, recently labeled “affluenza,” a sociopathic disorder based on too much privilege, most poverty research has focused on the decisions and values of single mothers in poor neighborhoods and their allegedly errant menfolk and delinquent sons.

A cultural plague

In his report, officially titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” Moynihan claimed that African-American family values produced too many fatherless households and nurtured what he called a “tangle of pathology,” a self-perpetuating, self-defeating cultural flaw responsible for persistently high rates of poverty and violent crime. Conservative columnists and politicians seized on the report, promulgated by a liberal in Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration, as official evidence that African-American culture was dangerously pathological. Civil rights leaders saw it as an attempt to blame the black community for systemic problems of racial discrimination. A wide spectrum of academic researchers criticized the report, finding errors and mistaken statistical logic; it was a hasty analysis wrapped in provocative rhetoric. Over the next decade, more evidence was brought forth that challenged Moynihan’s data and assumptions (and Lewis’). By the late 1970s, the premise that poor people have a distinctive culture that causes them to fail seemed to have been rejected.

Reagan’s election in 1980, however, rehabilitated the culture of poverty concept by invoking images of welfare queens and the supposed dangers of a dependent underclass. In 1984, Charles Murray, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote a popular book called “Losing Ground,” which claimed harmful social programs and bad behavior by the poor were the main causes of the growing poverty of the era. Liberal academics countered that unemployment in deindustrialized urban areas was the main cause of poverty, though some of their cohort also conceded Moynihan’s original premise, arguing that economic failure partly resulted from ineffective parenting within the underclass. Once again, cause and effect were up for grabs, and

conservatives (then, as now) opted for the appealing explanation that poor people cause their own problems.

Until we stop blaming the poor and accept the fact that government can help, we will perpetuate the current dystopic state as the new normal.

In his interview with Bennett, Ryan cited Murray approvingly, a reference that intensified the charges of racism levied against him. Murray is a co-author of “The Bell Curve,” published in 1994, which controversially posited a genetic link between race and IQ. His 2008 book, “Coming Apart,” argued that the white lower classes were largely abandoning marriage and family fidelity, that they too have been infected with the tangle of pathology. The steep rise in single-parent households among whites and Latinos is decried as a spreading cultural plague of bad family values, but what these trends actually confirm is the connection between a lagging economy and the ability of poor people to afford marriage.

Charting the poverty rate against other historical data shows that recessions bring steep rises in poverty and recoveries bring declines. The current rate is just over 15 percent (up from 11 percent in 2000), which is where it has been since 2009. It was also that high in 1983 and 1993, both periods of economic decline. Poverty has not returned to the extreme rates of the early 1960s (when it was over 20 percent), before the federal government enacted anti-poverty programs, which played an important role in reducing poverty in the recessions that followed. Earlier peaks were short-lived. Today, though, poverty has remained at 15 percent for nearly five years. We are warned that this is the new normal, and, disturbingly, so it seems to be.

Bad behavior from the top

So what causes poverty? What precipitates recessions that throw people out of work and curtail vital services in cash-strapped municipalities and states? The last one, which began in 2008, resulted from bad behavior, though not by poor people. Rather, we saw fraudulent and predatory practices by the captains of finance, corrupt

behavior by regulators and elected officials and an ethos condoning exploitation at all levels of the economy, especially against the most vulnerable. These practices are also cultural — driven by the rationalized prerogatives of people with too much wealth and power — and they wreak much more havoc than the shortcomings of poor parents.

For example, the decision of many employers to short workers' wages by not paying for overtime or by altering records of time and tips is a costly cultural choice. The Economic Policy Institute [determined](#) that wage theft in 2008 amounted to almost \$200 million, nearly four times the haul from all types of robberies in 2009 (about \$57 million). The Wall Street-caused collapse of 2008 saw 3.6 million jobs lost and up to 4 million home foreclosures, including a great many black and Latino victims of fraudulent, predatory mortgages. The wealthy perpetrators of this bad behavior have been perversely rewarded. Meanwhile, the racial wealth gap has grown enormously since 2008. Wealth inequality in the U.S. is greater now than at any time since 1928, and the share funneled to the top 1 percent continues to grow.

The convenient fiction that poverty is self-induced and caused by bad culture has a long pedigree. As Timothy Egan [pointed out](#) in a March 15 editorial in The New York Times, when the Irish were starving from the failure of the potato crop in the 1840s, the English aristocracy could have rescued them but declined to do so for fear of setting up a culture of dependency; Egan quotes Charles Trevelyan, who was in charge of the government's famine policy and claimed the Irish were "selfish, perverse and turbulent" — unfit for mercy. When Ryan, a descendant of refugees from the Irish famine, argues the merits of cutting food stamps for hungry families, he is re-enacting a cruel play in which his own ancestors were innocent victims.

It is time to put an end this canard once and for all. Until we stop blaming the wrong people and accept the fact that government can help, we will perpetuate the current dystopic state as the new normal. We need to lift the fog induced by the so-called culture of poverty and recognize that we really could wage an effective war against poverty.

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