



Fifty Years after the War on Poverty, the Safety Net for America's Families with Children is Frayed

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As we mark the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty, it is a good time to ask how well the safety net for America's poor families with children is holding up. New or expanded efforts to aid the poor were launched in the 1960s, some of which have since persisted and evolved, while others have been fundamentally revamped. What does research tell us about the effectiveness of the original and revised efforts – in the key areas of food programs, cash help, and support for low-income working families?

Food and Nutrition Programs

Food and nutrition programs for the poor were not central to national welfare policy before the 1960s, but they were central to the War on Poverty and have had a major impact ever since.

- **Food Stamps** were created in 1964 (and later evolved into a program called Supplemental Nutrition Assistance). Low-income families get allocations to help make food purchases affordable. How effectively has this program met its goals of reducing poverty, combating hunger and food insecurity, and improving nutrition? The best research adjusts measures of poverty to take into account near-cash benefits and tax benefits for the poor. According to such studies, without Food Stamp benefits the U.S. child poverty rate in 2010 would have been 21.2 percent instead of 18.2 percent. Additional studies show that, over time, Food Stamp expansions greatly improved nutrition and other aspects of health and development for poor children.
- **School breakfast and lunch programs** provide free or reduced-cost meals for low-income children in schools and child-care settings. They have played a small but significant role in reducing poverty. Using the best measures, the child poverty rate in 2010 would have been about 19.0 percent instead of 18.2 percent without school lunches; and there is also evidence that breakfast programs improve poor children's attendance and test scores.
- **Women, Infants and Children** is a program that provides vouchers to help low-income pregnant women and mothers of infants and toddlers purchase especially nutritious food. Grant levels are too modest to reduce poverty, but the program does improve health and nutrition. In particular, it helps mothers give birth to infants who weigh more, which furthers healthy development for these children.

Cash Assistance

The War on Poverty included cash welfare assistance, but major changes have since been made, creating a system where support goes mostly to families with adults who are employed.

- **Aid to Families with Dependent Children** provided cash benefits to poor mothers and their children, substantially reducing the depth of poverty and material hardship in the 1970s and 1980s. But the impact on poverty has waned since **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families** replaced the earlier welfare program after 1996. Current welfare programs provide very low levels of cash assistance, and only for limited periods of time.
- **Supplemental Security Income** was established in 1972 and provides a guaranteed basic annual income to poor families with a disabled child or adult. Benefit levels have been higher than for other welfare programs, so they do more to reduce extreme poverty for recipient families – and this program also prevents some families from falling into poverty in the first place.

Overall, we can say that cash welfare is no longer a major part of the U.S. safety net for poor families, except for those caring for disabled members. For the able-bodied, cash welfare did little to soften the economic blows from the recent Great Recession.

Income Supports for Working Families

Here is where we see huge shifts from the time of the War on Poverty. Supports for the poor have become much more tied to work by adult women and men alike.

- **Earned Income Tax Credit.** America's largest income support program, this started in 1975 and now provides a tax credit to families with children who have earnings up to about 150 percent of the poverty level. Census Bureau estimates show that the 2010 child poverty rate would have been 22.4 instead of 18.2 percent without this benefit, which has also been shown to improve maternal health, mental health, and child health and development.
- **Child Care Subsidies.** Efforts to help welfare recipients with child-care costs date from the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, and now child-care subsidies reach about 30% of eligible low-income families. These subsidies are not an entitlement, so coverage depends on funding. Child care subsidies promote parental employment, but researchers have found negative or neutral effects on child health and development. High quality care is known to be beneficial to youngsters, but poor parents often have to settle for lower-quality care.

The Safety Net Today

Fifty years after the War on Poverty, America's low-income families and children must rely on a tattered, minimal safety net. Food Stamps still reach most, and many working parents get tax credits and perhaps child-care subsidies to supplement low wages. More generous programs aid families caring for disabled members. But a true safety net would require some form of minimum monthly cash benefit for all kinds of families with children, regardless of disability or employment status. This is the norm in other advanced nations. But America's child tax credit is tiny and does not reach all families, even as low-income workers earn paltry wages and often do not get benefits at work. One in five U.S. children remains poor – compared to 27% half a century ago. This is unacceptable for an affluent nation that values equality of opportunity. The War on Poverty made a start, but much remains to be done to open job opportunities and construct a secure safety net for all of America's low-income families with children.

Read more in Jane Waldfogel, "The Safety Net for Families with Children," in *Legacies of the War on Poverty*, edited by Martha J. Bailey and Sheldon Danziger (Russell Sage Foundation, 2013), 153-179.