



Last Updated: October 2, 2018

National Debate Topic 2009-10: Poverty and Social Services: Resolved: The U.S. federal government should substantially increase social services for persons living in poverty in the United States

Introduction

SUPPORTERS ARGUE

Increasing funding for social services would aid millions of struggling Americans, perhaps even helping them out of poverty by providing for their basic needs. The recent global economic downturn has highlighted the need for more government-funded social programs.

OPPONENTS ARGUE

Private organizations and charities are the best sources of aid for low-income Americans. Government-run social programs already cost taxpayers billions of dollars a year; increasing their funding would drain U.S. coffers even further. Despite the economic downturn, there are still plenty of jobs available for low-income Americans.

There are currently more than 37 million Americans living in poverty. Although the percentage of poor Americans is, relative to the country's population, low historically, the actual number of impoverished U.S. residents has increased since 2000, when the figure was 31 million.

Approximately 5 million Americans are homeless, while about 43 million, including roughly 7 million children, are without health insurance. Additionally, due to the current economic downturn, hundreds of thousands of Americans are losing their jobs each month and, thus, their main source of income.

How much of a role should the federal government play in preventing or alleviating poverty? Should the government be responsible for helping the poor?



Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

A newly unemployed woman fills out an application for the federal food-stamp program at an unemployment-benefit center.

For much of its early history, the U.S. was without a so-called "social safety net"; there was minimal assistance from the government for impoverished Americans. That changed in the 20th century, however, as progressive politicians began to call for various programs to help low-income citizens.

Many of the social programs in the U.S. today—including Social Security and unemployment benefits—were initiated in the 1930s, during a decade-long economic crisis known as the Great Depression. During that period, jobs were very difficult to obtain, and about a quarter of Americans were unemployed. To combat the Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (D, 1933-45) instituted a variety of social programs, collectively known as the New Deal, designed to put Americans back to work and to ease the suffering caused by the Depression.

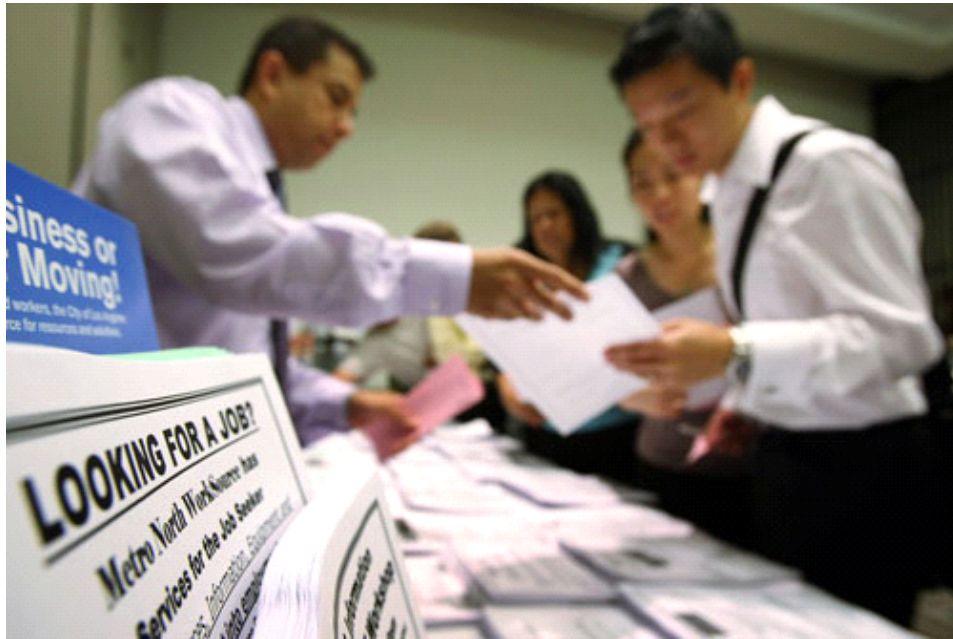
Roosevelt's successors Harry Truman (D, 1945-53) and Dwight Eisenhower (R, 1953-61) continued funding many of the New Deal programs, solidifying the role of the government in providing assistance to the poor. A slew of new social programs were created in the 1960s, when President Lyndon Johnson (D, 1963-69) waged his "War on Poverty," initiating a group of programs collectively known as the Great Society. [See President Johnson's 'Great Society' Speech (primary source)]

By the end of the 20th century, however, concerns that the government had become too intrusive in the lives of Americans led to a scaling back of federal programs, especially those intended to assist the poor. Indeed, the so-called Reagan revolution, promoted in the 1980s by the administration of President Ronald Reagan (R, 1981-89), emphasized scaling back the pervasiveness of "big government." In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton (D, 1993-2001) further altered the way the government dealt with the poor by signing a law that reshaped the federal welfare program, replacing financial assistance for low- or no-income families with incentives for welfare recipients to return to the workforce. [See President Clinton's Remarks on Welfare Reform (primary source)]

In December 2007, the U.S. entered a deep recession. The following year, the stock market lost nearly half its value, signaling to many that the U.S. economy could experience a prolonged downturn. With unemployment rising each month, the number of impoverished Americans is liable to increase substantially.

President Obama (D) has promoted a large role for the government in battling the recession and providing a social safety net for the poor; indeed, he signed legislation during his first 100 days in office that significantly expands

unemployment benefits for laid-off workers and funds a series of construction projects to create jobs aimed at strengthening the U.S. infrastructure.



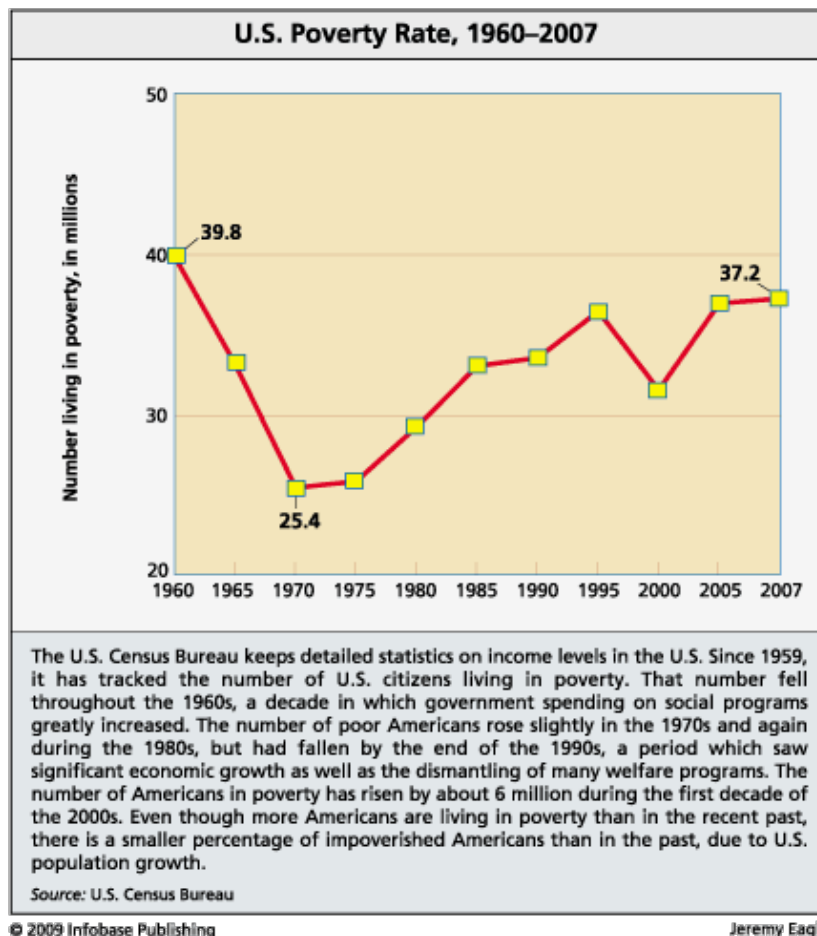
David McNew/Getty Images

Job seekers attend a job fair in Pasadena, California. The unemployment rate in the U.S. reached 9.4% in May 2009, its highest rate in 26 years. Mass layoffs throughout the U.S. have put a strain on state and federal unemployment insurance programs.

How should the government handle the problems of poverty and unemployment? Should it increase its funding of existing programs? Does it currently spend too much money on social programs, or not enough?

Proponents of increased spending on antipoverty programs argue that the U.S. government has an obligation to care for the country's least fortunate citizens. By ensuring that Americans at the bottom rung of the social ladder have adequate food, shelter and health care, the U.S. as a whole would be made stronger, advocates assert. A sturdy, well-funded social safety net is crucial to help low-income Americans deal with a fluctuating U.S. economy, proponents say.

Critics, meanwhile, contend that antipoverty programs do little more than breed laziness among low-income Americans. They argue that, if poor people knew that they could depend on the government to meet their basic needs, they would have little incentive to work hard, become self-sufficient and contribute to the U.S. economy. Additionally, opponents argue that federal antipoverty programs are too expensive as it is. It makes little sense to increase their funding, especially when there are countless private charities willing to help low-income Americans, opponents maintain.



The New Deal

In the 1920s the U.S. underwent a period of sustained economic growth. That era was also characterized, however, by vast economic inequality. Indeed, the economic benefits of the boom period, often referred to as the "roaring twenties," were limited to a relatively small number of citizens, and a large income gap existed between the rich and the poor.

In 1929, the U.S. stock market crashed. Before long, the Great Depression began, marked by extraordinarily high rates of unemployment and a severe economic contraction. People were unable to find jobs, and companies, making less money due to lowered demand, hired fewer and fewer workers.

In 1932, Roosevelt, the Democratic candidate for president, promised a "new deal for the American people." Indeed, Roosevelt's New Deal—a series of government-funded programs—was intended to create jobs and alleviate suffering among the unemployed. In his acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination, he declared that he "favored the use of certain types of public works as a further emergency means of stimulating employment." Roosevelt promised that, in addition to providing jobs for the unemployed, his New Deal programs would make lasting contributions to American life. In his nomination speech he said that "no economic end is served if we merely build without building for a necessary purpose."

When Roosevelt became president in March 1933, almost 25% of Americans were unemployed. Roosevelt's first 100 days in office were characterized by almost unprecedented cooperation between the president and Congress, in which a flurry of new laws were enacted and a number of programs were instituted to help the poor. That time period was so productive that it became a model for the first 100 days in office of all future presidents. CBS reporter Chip Reid has noted that Roosevelt believed that "the federal government had a direct responsibility to create jobs, and to pay for them with tax dollars." Reid described that philosophy as "a complete break from [Roosevelt's predecessor] Herbert Hoover [R, 1929-33] and past presidents who believed that only corporations create jobs, and only private charities should take care of the poor."

The largest New Deal program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), was established in 1935 to create jobs for the unemployed. (The program was renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939.) Projects funded by the WPA ranged from large industrial enterprises to commissions for works of art. The WPA, often considered "the signature program of the New Deal," was also one of Roosevelt's most controversial programs; the *New York Times* notes that it was the New Deal program "most attacked and reviled by conservatives," who felt that the U.S. should depend on private industry, not the government, to foster an economic recovery.

The WPA spent more than \$10 billion between 1935 and 1943. According to the *Times*, Roosevelt and WPA head Harry Hopkins "saw an infrastructure mired in the 19th century: unpaved roads, rickety bridges, inadequate water and sewage treatment systems or none at all, national parks and forests damaged by deforestation and erosion." The WPA thus focused on modernizing the U.S. infrastructure; the program funded, for example, the construction of about 650,000 miles of new roads. Other notable infrastructure projects overseen by the WPA included the presidential retreat, Camp David, in Maryland, which was built for federal employees in 1936; the Outer Bridge Drive, in Chicago; LaGuardia Airport, in New York City; and Doubleday Field, in Cooperstown, N.Y., home of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

Additionally, the WPA provided clean-up jobs after natural disasters, such as fires, hurricanes and floods. The program also created positions for teachers, who were employed to help expand literacy among adults. Other WPA projects provided jobs for creative artists, such as abstract painter Jackson Pollock and folk singer and songwriter Woody Guthrie. Nick Taylor, author of *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA*, explained, "The great thing that Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins recognized was that it made no sense whatsoever to take an excellent violin player and put him to work building a road.... He could provide, or she could provide, entertainment to people."

Another major New Deal program was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), designed to benefit the environment. The program sent about 3 million men between the ages of 17 and 23—all volunteers—to forests in every state to work on a variety of conservation projects, including planting trees and building reservoirs.

Despite the amount of money spent creating jobs, most experts agree that the New Deal did not end the Great Depression. It was the onset of World War II (1939-45), which necessitated increased military production and provided jobs to many Americans, that decisively improved economic conditions in the U.S. Still, many economists credit the New Deal with alleviating the symptoms of the Depression, easing the suffering of many Americans while making a lasting contribution to the U.S. infrastructure.

The most enduring New Deal programs were those created by the 1935 Social Security Act. Perhaps the most significant of those programs was Social Security itself.

Prior to the industrial revolution, when most people lived on small farms, families largely depended on those farms to provide for their elderly members. During the industrial revolution, however, the U.S. transitioned from an agricultural society to an industrial one; families moved from farms to the cities. Rather than working on family farms, individuals began working for others. Around that time, calls began to emerge for a government-sponsored retirement program to provide income for the elderly. Such calls intensified with the onset of the Depression.

In 1934, Roosevelt created a committee to investigate the possibility of a social security program. The resulting Social Security Act, signed by Roosevelt in 1935, provided income for retired workers over the age of 65.

Under Social Security, a payroll tax was imposed on workers' paychecks, with the money going into a trust fund. When workers retired, they would receive payments from that fund. Under the initial plan, workers received a lump-sum payment upon retiring. The first worker to qualify for Social Security was Ernest Ackerman, who retired the day after the program was initiated, in 1937. Five cents had been withheld from his pay during the one day he paid into the program, and he received a 17-cent lump-sum payment upon retiring. In 1940, the program was amended to break Social Security payments into monthly installments.

The Social Security Act also introduced unemployment benefits for the jobless. The program diverted part of the money from the payroll tax to an unemployment trust fund to compensate laid-off workers.

U.S. Poverty Threshold For a Family of Four	
Year	Poverty Threshold
1960	\$3,022
1965	\$3,223
1970	\$3,968
1975	\$5,500
1980	\$8,414
1985	\$10,989
1990	\$13,359
1995	\$15,569
2000	\$17,604
2005	\$19,971
2008	\$21,910

The U.S. poverty threshold is a measure used by the government to track the country's poverty rate. Calculated by the Census Bureau, the threshold represents the minimum annual income needed to maintain an adequate standard of living in the U.S. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, meanwhile, maintains the nation's poverty guideline, which is similar to the poverty threshold but is calculated differently. The poverty guideline is used to determine eligibility for various social programs. Both statistics are updated annually to account for rising prices. Critics of the statistics argue that the poverty line set by the government is too low, leading to poverty being underreported.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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Another long-lasting initiative established by the Social Security Act was the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which is now more commonly known as welfare. The program was designed to provide financial assistance to meet the needs of children whose parents were, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, "absent from the home, incapacitated, deceased, or unemployed."

In 1938, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a federal minimum wage. The law also mandated that employers pay workers time-and-a-half wages for working overtime, and instituted child labor protections.

While many New Deal programs, such as the CCC and the WPA, ended after the Depression, the social services created under the Social Security Act endured, becoming cornerstones of the government's efforts to protect Americans from the effects of poverty. Indeed, although those programs were controversial at the time they were enacted, they became so popular that they were renewed and strengthened by the presidential administrations of Roosevelt's successors, beginning with Truman and Eisenhower.

Despite the fact that the 1950s was one of the more equitable periods in U.S. history in terms of income distribution, the notion of a social safety net—a series of programs that would provide economic and financial protection for the poor—continued to be widely accepted. Even while a strong middle class was rising and the income gap between rich and poor was narrowing significantly, Eisenhower wrote to his brother Edgar, "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history. There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things.... Their number is negligible and they are stupid."



AP Photo/Coeur d'Alene Press, Jerome A. Pollos

Volunteers at a mobile food bank distribute food to needy people at a church in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in July 2008. The food bank was sponsored by America's Second Harvest (now known as Feeding America), a private charity that provides food to low-income Americans.

Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society'

In 1963, Vice President Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency after President John F. Kennedy (D, 1961-63) was assassinated. One of Johnson's first acts was to push civil rights legislation, which had been championed by Kennedy, through Congress.

Johnson also pledged to have legislation passed to help the poor, which Kennedy had also promoted. In a speech at the University of Michigan on May 22, 1964, Johnson spoke of the opportunity "to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society." He noted that such a society "rests on abundance and liberty for all," and "demands an end to poverty and racial injustice.... But that is just the beginning."

Indeed, ending the racist legacy of segregation had been a central goal of Johnson's. He also declared a "War on Poverty," pledging to provide equal opportunity for low-income Americans of every background. Although the U.S. economy was thriving in the early 1960s, many rural areas, such as Appalachia, had not been affected by the expansion of the middle class that took place during the 1950s. Indeed, in 1960, several years before Johnson became president, about one quarter of American families were living below the poverty line. Johnson said in his speech,

The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents.... It is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community.

A central goal of Johnson's Great Society was to provide improved education and job training for all Americans. In 1964, Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), which established a variety of new social services to be administered under the auspices of the newly created Office of Economic Opportunity.

One such program was the Job Corps, a free career training program intended to provide work for underprivileged young Americans. The Web site of the program says that its goal is to teach the "fundamental skills students need to secure and maintain employment."

The EOA also established the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program, chartered to be a "domestic Peace Corps." VISTA volunteers were assigned to poor communities, where they would work to help improve living standards in various ways.

In 1964, Congress also passed the Food Stamp Act, which instituted a program designed to help poor families receive "a greater share of the Nation's food abundance." The program issued "coupons" to low-income families intended solely for the purchase of food.

Other Great Society initiatives included the Wilderness Protection Act, which protected more than 9 million acres of forest land from industrial development; the Voting Rights Act, which outlawed discriminatory practices that were intended to keep African Americans from voting; and the Air and Water Quality Acts, which attempted to reduce environmental pollution.

While many of the programs initiated as part of the Great Society still exist, perhaps its most enduring legacy was the creation of Medicare and Medicaid, two government-sponsored health insurance programs that cover the elderly and the poor, respectively.

The programs were authorized in 1965, when Congress passed an updated version of the Social Security Act. The Medicare program, which was the larger of the two, was funded by the same payroll tax as Social Security. Workers would contribute to the program from each paycheck, with their contributions being matched by their employers; upon retiring, in addition to receiving Social Security payments, workers would be entitled to health insurance.

In the mid-1960s, about 44% of senior citizens had no health insurance and could ill-afford to pay their medical bills. As a result, around one third of seniors were living below the poverty line. Upon signing the legislation, Johnson said,

No longer will older Americans be denied the healing miracle of modern medicine. No longer will illness crush and destroy the savings that they have so carefully put away over a lifetime so that they might enjoy dignity in their later years. No longer will young families see their own incomes...eaten away simply because they are carrying out their deep moral obligations to their parents.

Johnson was initially popular with Americans; he was elected to a full term as president in 1964 by a wide margin over Republican challenger Barry Goldwater. By the end of Johnson's tenure, however, the U.S. had become mired in the increasingly unpopular conflict in Vietnam (1959-75), which began as a civil war between the northern and southern parts of the country. The U.S. backed South Vietnam against the communist North, which was supported by the Soviet Union. Tens of thousands of young Americans were killed in the conflict, and, by the end of Johnson's presidency, nationwide protests against the war had gripped the U.S. The war shifted the public's attention from Johnson's social programs; by 1968, he had become so unpopular that he decided not to run for reelection.

1996 Welfare Reform

While the Great Society programs corresponded with a reduction in the number of Americans living in poverty, some experts say the increased government spending took its toll on the U.S. economy. Critics of government spending say that large budget deficits created by Johnson's programs led to an economic slowdown in the 1970s, marked by soaring inflation—a rise in prices beyond what people could afford.

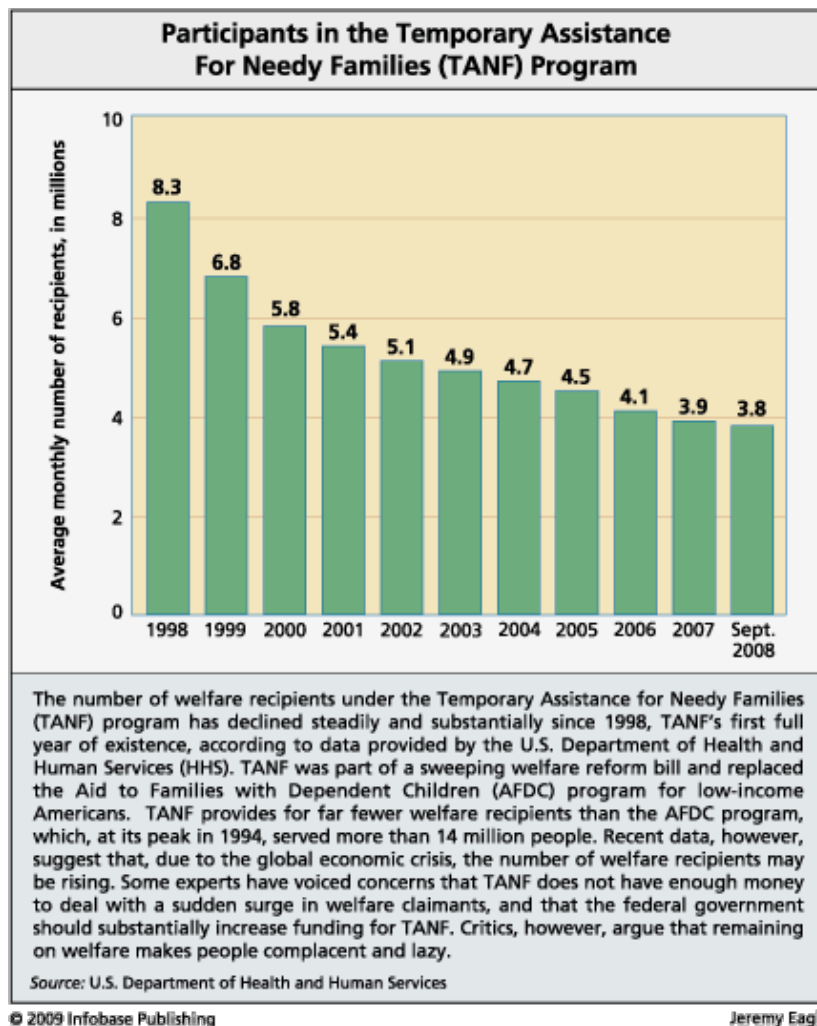
Social programs became less prevalent during the 1980s. In his first inaugural address, President Reagan declared, "Government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem." Indeed, during the so-called Reagan revolution of the 1980s, conservatives assailed excessive government spending and sought to curtail many social programs.

That trend continued into the 1990s, when President Clinton signed a sweeping welfare reform bill that, in many ways, dismantled the program. Welfare had long been controversial, criticized by conservatives for doling out cash

to unemployed Americans who, they argued, did not contribute to society and therefore did not deserve government assistance. Reagan had spoken many times of a "welfare queen" who defrauded the government out of thousands of dollars and flagrantly drove around Chicago in a Cadillac. Clinton himself had, during his 1992 presidential campaign, promised to "end welfare as we know it."

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, supported and signed by Clinton in 1996, removed many of the welfare benefits for the poor established in the 1930s. The new legislation replaced the AFDC program with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. TANF was designed to encourage unemployed or low-income parents to find jobs instead of staying home with their children. The new rules placed strict time limits on how long people could receive welfare benefits, and ended federal housing subsidies, which helped poor Americans pay their rent.

The new program provided incentives, such as assistance in paying for child care for low-income parents who sought employment. Additionally, while the AFDC had been administered directly by the federal government, TANF granted states a large amount of leniency in drafting their own welfare rules. Indeed, TANF funds are distributed by the federal government to states, each of which administers its own financial assistance program.



The welfare reform act had a large impact on the way the U.S. provided assistance for its poor. Former head of the Department of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt described the legislation as "a profoundly important philosophic shift.... This was...one of the few things in a decade you can look at and say the world really changed." Journalist Richard Wolf noted in *USA Today* that the act "ended a 60-year-old federal guarantee of cash aid for the poor," and stated that, as the legislation passed, "conservatives celebrated and liberals screamed." [See Differences Among State Welfare Programs ([sidebar](#))]

The 'Great Recession'

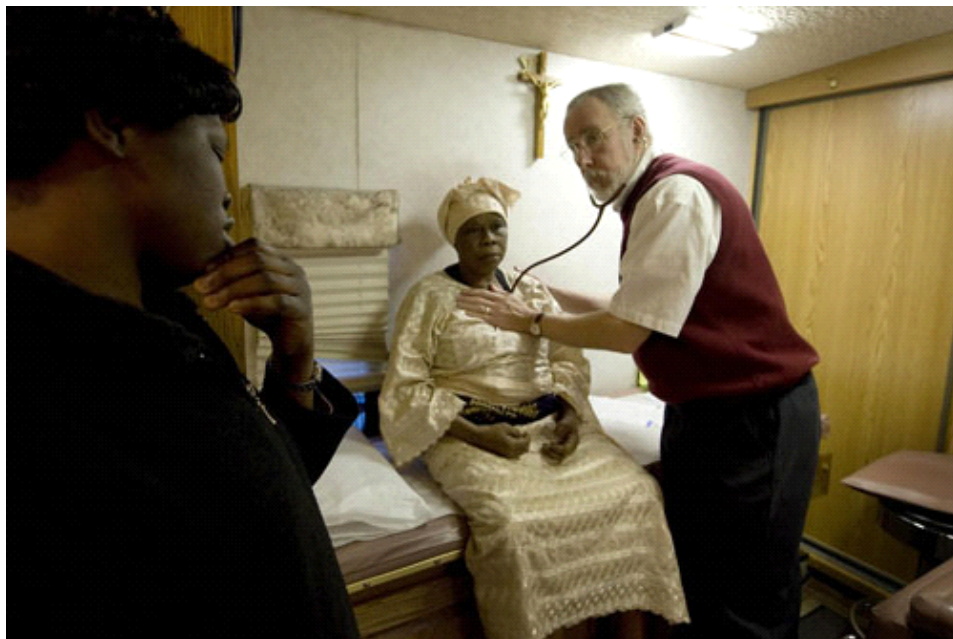
The U.S. economy was generally strong throughout the 1990s, and the number of poor Americans decreased. The economy began to struggle, however, around 2000, and fell into a recession in 2001. Although the country ostensibly recovered within a couple of years, the number of Americans living under the poverty line continued to increase. Wealthy Americans, however, earned more money than they had in decades. In fact, in 2005, the income gap between rich and poor reached its highest level since 1928. [See Understanding the Income Gap

(sidebar)]

By the end of 2007, the economy had entered a recession. The following year, the situation worsened; many experts described the economic crisis as the most severe faced by the U.S. since the Great Depression. Indeed, unemployment rose considerably, with hundreds of thousands of workers losing their jobs each month. Many experts have dubbed the downturn the "Great Recession."

President Obama took office in January 2009, promising to concentrate all the government's resources on battling the recession. In February, Congress passed a stimulus package that Obama had heavily promoted. The package greatly expanded unemployment benefits, extending and increasing payments to unemployed workers currently eligible for assistance and increasing the number of workers who qualified for help.

That same month, Obama introduced his federal budget for 2010, which presented a drastic change in priorities from the budgets drawn up by his predecessor, George W. Bush (R, 2001-09). Whereas Bush's budgets had focused on lowering taxes, Obama's budget called for a tax increase on the wealthiest Americans. Obama also sought to initiate a national health care plan, and a series of alternative energy initiatives that would create "green" jobs for unemployed workers.



Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

A doctor treats a patient in a Mission of Mercy mobile health clinic in Frederick, Maryland. Mission of Mercy is a nonprofit organization that provides free health care in communities with high poverty rates.

Some observers likened Obama's budget priorities to Roosevelt's New Deal; others compared his attempts to alleviate poverty to Johnson's Great Society. *New York Times* journalist David Sanger, however, noted that Obama's initiatives appeared to be "aimed more at a middle class that missed out on the [economic boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s] than at the nation's poorest, who would benefit to a significantly lesser extent."

Still, many observers have compared Obama's desire to undo the Bush administration's economic policies to Johnson's crusade to eradicate poverty. Obama has claimed that Bush's policies allowed "the playing field to be tilted so far in the favor of so few." Indeed, Sanger noted that Obama has adopted a far more progressive agenda than Bill Clinton, the previous Democrat in the White House, claiming that Obama "appears to have shed President Clinton's fear of being labeled an old-fashioned liberal." [See President Obama Discusses His Initiatives for the Middle Class primary source]

Antipoverty Programs in the U.S.

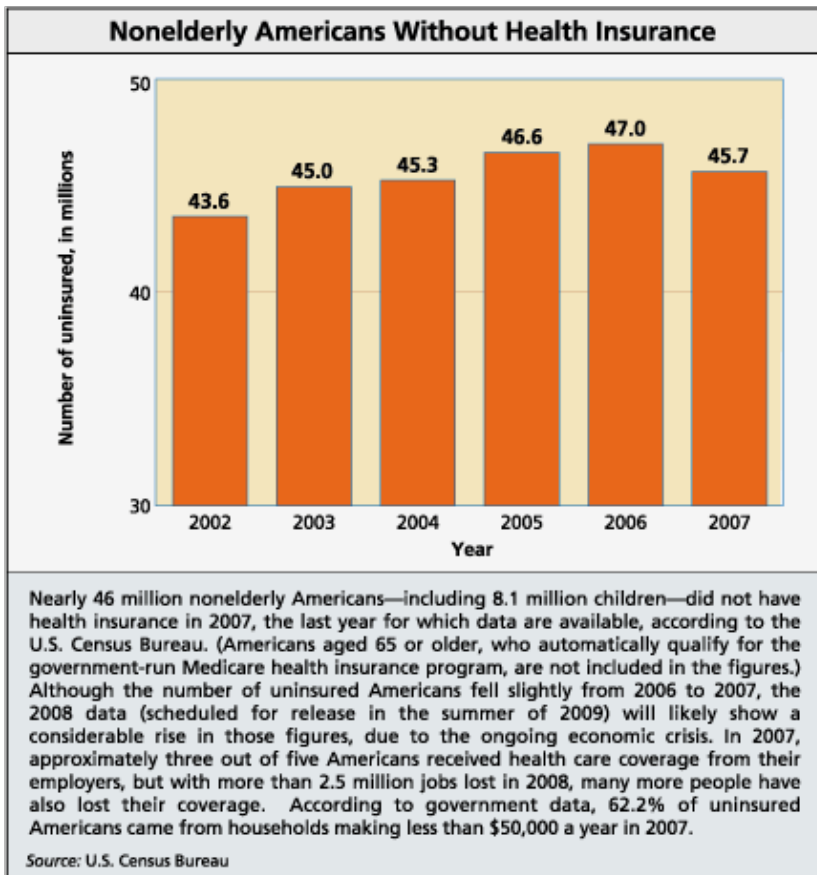
The federal government currently offers many programs to help the poor. Those programs include assistance in paying for education, purchasing food, finding work and more. The programs include:

- Social Security, a national retirement program for U.S. workers established in 1935, during the Great Depression. All employees pay a payroll tax out of each paycheck which goes into a Social Security trust fund. Workers between the ages of 62 and 70 can begin to receive monthly payments after they retire. The amount of each payment depends on how long, and how much, they have paid into the program.
- Unemployment insurance, also created in 1935 in response to the Great Depression. The program, according to the Department of Labor, "helps cushion the impact of economic downturns and brings economic stability to communities, states, and the nation by providing temporary income support for laid off workers." Unemployment benefits tend to increase during times of economic hardship; indeed, the economic stimulus package passed by Congress in February 2009 provides increased eligibility and extended benefits for many unemployed workers.
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the primary welfare program in the U.S.; TANF replaced the AFDC program when welfare was overhauled in 1996. TANF is distributed to states via block grants, through which the federal government supplies funds to local jurisdictions with only general requirements as to how that money is to be used. Whereas AFDC, for the most part, provided indefinite financial assistance to the poor, TANF is, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, "designed to help needy families achieve self-sufficiency." TANF has strict guidelines to determine which poor families may be eligible for funds; most of TANF's requirements mandate that participants in the program seek full-time employment. The federal government requires that TANF fund recipients who do not find a job within two months do community service. Adults without jobs after two years in the program are no longer eligible for assistance. Other aspects of the program, however, vary from state to state.
- Medicare, which offers health insurance to senior citizens. As with Social Security, workers have money deducted from each paycheck that goes into a trust fund; when they reach the age of 65, they become eligible to receive health insurance through Medicare.
- Medicaid, which helps pay for health insurance for low-income individuals and families. Like TANF, Medicaid is administered by the states; eligibility requirements and benefits, therefore, differ from state to state.
- State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), created in 1997 to provide insurance for children from low-income families. Also administered by state governments, the program was designed to help uninsured families whose income was too high to qualify for Medicaid but who could not afford insurance for their children. It was recently expanded to include an additional 4 million children.
- Head Start, established by the EOA to prepare underprivileged children for school. The program provides federal funds to private and public educational institutions to help children acquire the skills they need to succeed in school.
- National School Lunch Program, established by Congress in 1946 to distribute federal assistance to public and private schools to provide free or low-cost lunches to schoolchildren.
- Federal Pell Grant Program, which provides grants to low-income college students. Pell Grants are accepted at about 5,400 colleges.
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the federal Food Stamp Program. According to its Web site, SNAP "helps low-income people and families buy the food they need for good health."
- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, more commonly known as WIC. The program provides healthy food to low-income women supporting children up to the age of five who are, according to the Food and Nutrition Service, "at nutritional risk."
- Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), provided by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The EITC was approved by Congress in 1975 and allows workers with extremely low incomes to receive a tax refund that

exceeds the amount of the taxes that they owe.

- Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which provides assistance to poor Americans who have trouble paying their utility bills. LIHEAP funds are distributed to states based on their prevailing weather patterns and their poverty levels.
- Housing Choice Vouchers, provided by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Housing vouchers allow poor families to either purchase or rent affordable housing. HUD provides a variety of voucher programs. One of the best known is the Section 8 Rental Voucher Program, in which participants must spend 30% of their household income on rent; the government pays the landlord the difference between that amount and the fair rent value for the property as determined by the Public Housing Agency, a division of HUD.
- Employment and Training Administration (ETA), operated by the Department of Labor. The program expands upon unemployment benefits for laid-off workers. The ETA is a major participant in the Obama administration's "green jobs" project, which, the administration says, will provide jobs in the alternative energy industry to Americans. According to the Department of Labor, the ETA will "support on-the-ground apprenticeship and job training programs to meet growing demand for green construction professionals skilled in energy efficiency and renewable energy installations."

In May 2009, various media outlets reported that two of the largest government-run social programs—Social Security and Medicare—were in serious financial straits. The trust funds that finance the two programs, the government announced, would be depleted in 2037 and 2017, respectively. For years, both programs ran surpluses—that is, they took in more money from taxes than they paid out. A rising number of elderly Americans, however, has prompted experts to worry about the solvency of the two programs. A fall in general income as a result of the current recession has exacerbated the programs' financial problems. The news ignited long-term fears for the economy; *New York Times* journalist Robert Pear noted, "The fragility of the two programs is a concern not just for current beneficiaries, but also for future retirees, taxpayers and politicians."



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Jeremy Eagle

Supporters Argue: Government Should Spend More Money on Antipoverty Programs

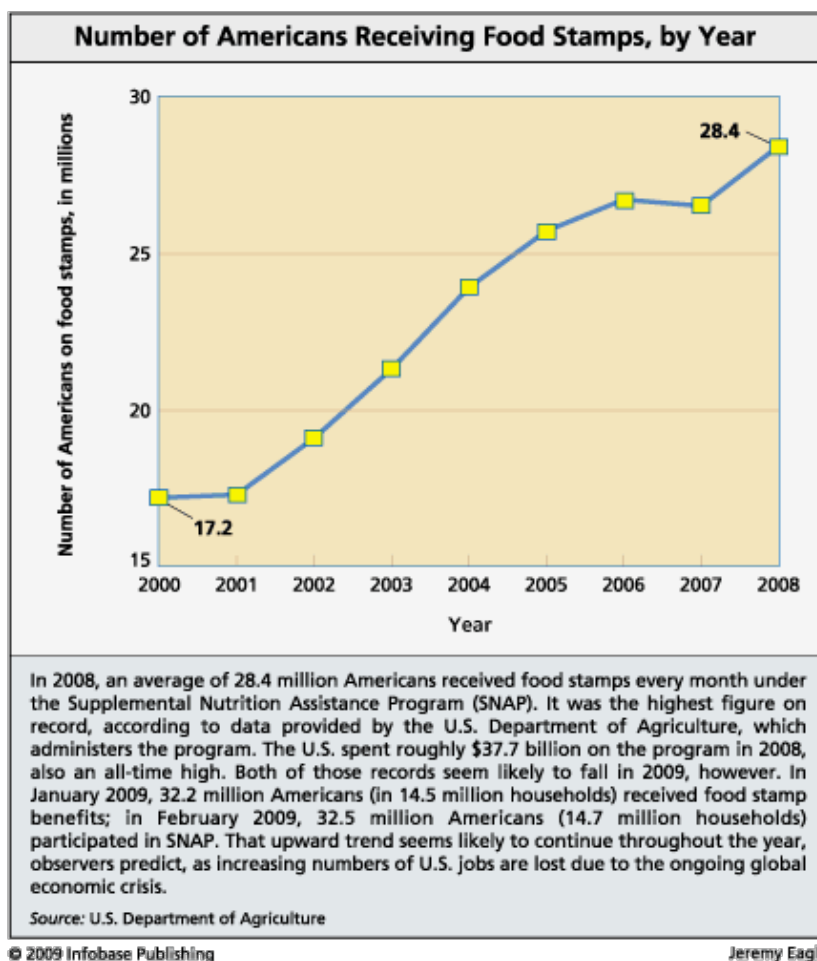
Proponents of increased federal funding for social-service programs maintain that the U.S. government has a moral obligation to assist low-income Americans. Despite the recent economic downturn, supporters note, the United States is still by far the world's richest country in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), the total value of all the goods and services produced by a country in a given year. It is inexcusable, they maintain, that a country with so much wealth could let so many millions of its people descend into poverty.

That is especially true, they note, in light of a study conducted in February 2009 which found that growing up in poverty has an adverse effect on the development of children's brains. The study, presented by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, stated that "many young children growing up in very poor families with low social status experience unhealthy levels of stress hormones, which impair their neural development." Children of poverty risk long-lasting damage to their brains, supporters argue, which ultimately limits their ability to transcend their impoverished backgrounds, thereby creating a permanent underclass in the United States.

Supporters of antipoverty programs contend that, without any help from the government, poor people are likely to stay mired in poverty. "The poorer you are, the more things cost," *Washington Post* journalist DeNeen Brown wrote in May 2009. "More in money, time, hassle, exhaustion, menace. This is a fact of life that reality television and magazines don't often explain."

Representative Earl Blumenauer (D, Oregon), one of the House's strongest proponents of federal antipoverty programs, elaborated, telling Brown:

The poor pay more for a gallon of milk; they pay more on a capital basis for inferior housing. The poor and 100 million who are struggling for the middle class actually end up paying more for transportation, for housing, for health care, for mortgages.... The poor pay more for things middle-class America takes for granted.



By aiding the least fortunate Americans, advocates assert, federal antipoverty programs actually benefit the entire

country. Federally funded food stamps and housing vouchers, they note, are used to purchase goods and shelter, thereby boosting local economies. Increasing funding for the federal school lunch program, they contend, would lead to healthier lunches that use fresh fruits and vegetables, thereby lowering the rate of obesity in the United States. In addition, if the federal government gave more money to SCHIP, all Americans would "save money and strengthen our economy as kids get more preventative care," Bill Scher of the Campaign for America's Future, a politically progressive think tank, wrote for the *Huffington Post* in 2007, "instead of waiting for grievous illness to take them to the [emergency room]."

Perhaps the most compelling reason to substantially increase funding for federal social programs, proponents contend, is that those programs have been proven to work. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman noted in February 2008 that poverty plummeted during the years when Johnson's Great Society program was being adequately funded. However, Krugman wrote, in subsequent decades, "American politics shifted to the right, attention shifted from the suffering of the poor to the alleged abuses of welfare [by recipients], and the fight against poverty was largely abandoned."

Antipoverty advocates argue that it would be relatively simple for the federal government to find the money for programs such as SNAP and TANF. They contend that the government very well could have redirected a big portion of the \$700 billion bailout bill—which was passed in early 2009 and was aimed at the U.S.'s failing financial sector—toward such programs. "Since the government is giving away all this other money, why can't they give us enough to eat for a month, especially the seniors and the poor people?" Adell Davis, a low-income senior citizen subsisting on food stamps on the South Side of Chicago, told NBC news in November 2008.

Finally, a small percentage of antipoverty advocates characterize themselves as socialists, arguing that capitalism itself is to blame for poverty in the United States. "The creation of poverty is...a necessary by-product of capitalism," Tony Wilsdon of the organization Socialist Alternative wrote in 2005. "It flows from the internal workings of the system, which allows a few rich owners of vast capital to extract the labor of its workers for a pittance."

Opponents Argue: Government Should Not Spend More Money on Antipoverty Programs

Opponents of expanding federal funding for antipoverty programs argue that such programs encourage laziness and complacency among low-income Americans. If Americans know that they can fall back on a generously funded welfare program, opponents contend, they will have little incentive to work very hard. Critics argue that programs such as TANF actually hurt low-income Americans more than they help them, because they discourage them from becoming valuable members of society. People who rely on antipoverty programs have no incentive to increase their earning power, opponents maintain, since all of their basic needs are met by the government.

Antipoverty programs are already a tremendous strain on the federal budget, critics say; funding them further is simply a bad idea. Funding for programs such as Medicaid—which is budgeted for every year, no matter what the state of the economy—threatens to "drown future generations in taxes and debt," according to Brian Riedl and Alison Acosta Fraser of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. Indeed, the money for such programs has to come from somewhere, critics argue; Riedl and Fraser claim that the lavish funding for antipoverty programs comes at the expense of future generations of Americans, who will be stuck with the bill. "America faces a future of soaring taxes and government spending that will cause poor economic performance," Riedl and Fraser wrote for the Heritage Foundation website in 2009. "Americans will pay onerous taxes, and future generations will have lower living standards than Americans enjoy today."

Opponents of increased funding for antipoverty programs have suggested implementing random drug testing among potential recipients of government benefits. They maintain that such a procedure would ensure that the money is not going to waste. "Nobody's being forced into these assistance programs," Craig Blair (R), a delegate in the West Virginia House, said in March 2009, as quoted by the Associated Press. "If so many jobs require random drug tests these days, why not these benefits?"

People in the United States, critics argue, do not want government assistance in the form of antipoverty programs. "Americans are open to good ideas from government, as always, but they are still skeptical and fiercely self-sufficient," *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote in April 2009. "Middle-class voters are not willing to hand over higher taxes in exchange for more federal services," Brooks adds.



Chris Gaythen/Getty Images

Former president Jimmy Carter (D, 1977-81) and his wife, Rosalynn (far right), help volunteers for Habitat for Humanity International build a house in Violet, Louisiana. Habitat for Humanity designs and builds houses for the needy all over the world.

Many critics argue that the recent debate over funding antipoverty programs is an overreaction to the recession. Low-income Americans, opponents claim, are perfectly capable of pulling themselves out of poverty, even during an economic downturn. "[J]obs, in fact, are available for people trying to get off public assistance," Peter Cove, the founder of America Works, a private company that helps hard-to-employ people find private-sector jobs, wrote for the *Daily News* in February 2009. "In any economy, even this one, there is churn in the labor market. People resign, are fired or die. When that happens, jobs open up."

Opponents maintain that many supporters of increasing funding for antipoverty programs have little credibility on the issue. The Welfare Reform package implemented in the 1990s, critics note, did not increase poverty in the United States the way the law's opponents claimed it would. "One frequently cited study predicted that more than a million children would be thrown into poverty," Michael Tanner, the director of health and welfare studies at the Cato Institute, wrote for the *Orange County Register* in August 2006. "Welfare advocates painted vivid pictures of families sleeping on sidewalks, widespread starvation, and worse."

Indeed, critics note, fewer Americans have been living in poverty since welfare reform took effect. "[S]urveys of former welfare recipients indicate that they themselves believe their quality of life has improved since leaving welfare," Tanner wrote. "Many of these former recipients actually praise welfare reform for encouraging them to look for work, for giving them a fresh start, and for giving them a chance to make things better for themselves and their children."

The Future of Antipoverty Programs in the U.S.

While campaigning for president, Obama vowed to expand the scope of many prominent federal antipoverty programs, from the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program to HOPE VI, a program dedicated to demolishing public-housing projects and building mixed-income communities in their place. His commitment to antipoverty

programs heartened supporters. However, some of those supporters said they were disappointed when Obama announced that he was not considering converting the U.S. health care system into a universal, single-payer system. Obama argued that it would be more practical to improve the existing, private health care system than it would be to completely overhaul health care.

Despite that setback, many supporters of antipoverty programs say they are encouraged by Obama's stances on many poverty-related issues. Proponents argue that Obama's approach to poverty-related matters is fundamentally different from that of his predecessor, President Bush. Critics, meanwhile, maintain that boosting funding for antipoverty programs is always a mistake, but would be especially unwise during the present recession.

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Contact Information

Information on how to contact organizations that are either mentioned in the discussion of poverty and social services or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:

Feeding America
35 East Wacker Drive
Suite 2000
Chicago, Ill. 60601
Telephone: (800) 771-2303
Internet: www.feedingamerica.org

National Center for Children in Poverty
215 W. 125th Street, 3rd Floor
New York, N.Y.
Telephone: (646) 284-9600
Internet: www.nccp.org

Social Security Administration
Office of Public Inquiries
Windsor Park Building
6401 Security Blvd.
Baltimore, Md. 21235
Telephone: (800) 772-1213
Internet: www.ssa.gov

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201
Telephone: (202) 619-0257
Internet: www.hhs.gov

U.S. Department of Labor
Frances Perkins Building
200 Constitution Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20210
Telephone: (866) 487-2365
Internet: www.dol.gov

U.S. Food and Nutrition Service
3101 Park Center Drive
Alexandria, Va. 22302
Telephone: (703) 305-2281
Internet: www.fns.usda.gov

For further information about the ongoing debate over poverty and social services, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:

Comprehensive antipoverty program
Food stamps
Medicare/Medicaid
Social safety net
Social Security
Welfare

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