

Blaming the Poor for Being Poor

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Daniel Patrick Moynihan touched off a fiery public debate in 1965. It remains very much with us today.

First appointed by President Kennedy as Assistant Secretary of Labor, Moynihan became a key architect of President Johnson's sweeping War on Poverty policy. He was later became an esteemed Senator representing New York between 1977 and 2001.

Moynihan's policy research, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," set off the controversy. This research, popularly known as the "Moynihan Report," argued: "the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling. So long as this situation persists," said Moynihan, "the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself."

Moynihan never referred to the "culture of poverty" in the original policy research. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis developed the notion in 1959 while studying poor families of Mexico. Soon, some believed that Moynihan's work advanced a "culture of poverty" explanation about America's inner city poverty involving mostly Black and Hispanic Americans. Supporters and opponents of Johnson's War on Poverty circled wagons.

Opponents of the policy, mostly political conservatives, used the culture of poverty thesis to attribute the persistent cycle of poverty to the characteristics of the poor themselves, and eventually to the welfare state fostered by government policy. By the 1970s, the War on Poverty came under criticism for not reducing generational poverty (a term economists apply to persistent poverty) because programs failed to change the values, attitudes, and behaviors leading the poor to their own folly. By the 1980s and 1990s, conservatives based political campaigns and careers on the idea that War on Poverty programs created generational poverty by rewarding the poor for irresponsible behavior and welfare dependency.

Supporters of the policy, usually political liberals, were critical of the way conservatives used the culture of poverty thesis to "blame the victim" as they focused on another aspect of the original Moynihan Report to explain persistent poverty. The original had traced the origins of family and social problems experienced by the poor to larger historical and structural forces in society. In the case of Black families, Moynihan specifically cited the history of slavery and the structure of discrimination erected by Jim Crow legislation as forces giving rise to the crumbling families and other social problems. Liberals later added many other structural factors such as the gutting of viable economies in city centers, the disappearance of low-level jobs with living wages, and systemic social and economic discrimination against the poor.

By the end of the 1990s, the American public routinely divided policy makers and fellow citizens into one of two competing camps. Those who believe the poor are poor because they lack personal responsibility and a work ethic; and those who think budget-cutting politicians, globalizing economic markets, social stigma, and discrimination victimize the poor.

Today in Tom Green County, about 18,000 residents (16.2% of the population) live on incomes below the federal poverty level. About 7,000 (6.8% of the population) live in "severe poverty" with incomes below half of the poverty level. Interestingly, their demographic characteristics do

not match well with images of the poor resulting from the long public debate over the culture of poverty. The table below shows the demography of poverty in Tom Green County based on the 2012 American Community Survey from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Demography of Poverty in Tom Green County

The Demography of Poverty in Tom Green County	Population	Poverty Rate	Percent of Poor
Population	113,281	16.20%	100.00%
Seniors (age 65 & over)	16,736	8.90%	8.50%
Black	5,500	21.10%	5.30%
Hispanic	41,575	22.50%	52.20%
Children (under age 18)	25,554	22.20%	32.50%
Female	57,121	18.00%	57.10%

African-Americans, for example, do not comprise a substantial segment of the poverty population. It is true that local Blacks experience a higher rate of poverty than the general population by a margin of 21.1 to 16.2 percent. Nevertheless, Blacks make up only 5.3 percent of the poor in Tom Green County.

Hispanics have a rate of poverty (22.5%) very similar to African Americans (21.1%). Because they are a much larger segment of the total population, however, Hispanics comprise 52.2 percent of the local poor. Females are the only other demographic group forming a majority of the poverty population. Fifty-seven percent of the poor in Tom Green County are female.

Surprises also appear in the age characteristics of the poor. The rate of poverty among seniors, for instance, is substantially lower (8.9%) than the general population (16.2%) and only 8.5 percent of the overall poverty population is age 65 and over. Children under age 18, on the other hand, have a 22.2 percent rate of poverty and comprise about one-third of the total number of local poor.

Behavior traits of the poor also defy stereotypes descending from the long debate. Take the well-worn conservative notion that the culture of poverty encourages welfare dependency for example. It has been nearly two decades since we enacted sweeping welfare reforms in 1996 largely to address this issue. Amazingly, however, this stereotype survives when only 3.9 percent of the local poor are receiving direct assistance for needy families (TANF) or other kinds of government assistance according to 2012 Census Bureau data.

The work environment is more challenging for those in poverty. In 2012, 44 percent of the local poor aged 16 and over participated in the labor force and 65 percent of these labor participants had gainful employment. Each of these numbers is about 20 points lower than the corresponding rates of labor force participation and employment for the overall working age population.

Conservatives often read lower labor force participation and employment rates among the poor as indicators of unwillingness to work. The facts about the local working poverty population, however, deny using a broad brush to stereotype the poor as lazy. Truth is some individuals at all levels of income are unwilling to work.

The Behavior of the Local Poor

Facts about the behavior of the local poor	Rate of Behavior
Receiving government assistance of any kind	3.90%
Participating in the labor force	44.10%
Employed (if in the labor force)	65.40%
Unmarried (Divorced, Separated, Never Married)	53.30%
Females Unmarried	53.80%
Unmarried females with children	34.00%
Children with no parent in the labor force	41.00%
Children living with mother not in the labor force	48.80%

Children living in poverty face issues that are more serious for the future. With 22 percent of local kids living under the poverty line, many face daily problems connected to inadequate nutrition, domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse, and a host of obstacles to the most modest levels of opportunity and success. Census data from 2012 indicate that as many as four of every ten poor kids live in families without a parent engaged in the labor force.

Circumstances like these describe the situation of approximately 2,000 children in Tom Green County. Together they comprise about 12 percent of the overall population in poverty. They are the ones most likely to experience persistent or generational poverty in the years ahead.

The previous Pathways to Progress column in the July 3 edition of the Standard Times emphasized the demographic transformation of the local community into a majority Hispanic population. The article emphasized the necessity of closing long established historical gaps in education, skills, occupations, and earnings between the current minority populations and the non-Hispanic white majority.

Today's writing is about one of the deeply entrenched difficulties in stepping forward toward finally closing the gaps. For nearly fifty years, Americans have competed in a blame-game, sometimes with derision, but always pointing crossways at the causes of poverty.

Some have had no patience for efforts to address poverty by changing established social and economic institutions, wanting only for change in the hearts and minds of poor people. Others have wanted nothing more than to overturn the rules of established economic and social practices to make room for the poor.

In "Culture of Poverty Makes a Comeback," Patricia Cohen gives a popular newspaper account of some of the recent research showing the futility of sticking to our sides in the long debate triggered by the Moynihan Report. More and more, current research is revealing how effective change in the attitudes and behavior of the poor requires corresponding adjustments to support access and success of the poor in schools and jobs. Likewise, workable changes in access demands conversion of attitudes and behavior. Communities making progress at closing the gaps address both sides of the coin.

Now is the time for creating new solutions in our community; new solutions supporting access and opportunity, and change in hearts and minds.