

# **Poverty in America**

## **Proposed Debate Topic 2009-2010**

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“There is a familiar America. It is celebrated in speeches and advertised on television and in the magazines. It has the highest mass standard of living the world has ever known.

In the 1950’s this America worried about itself, yet even its anxieties were products of abundance. . . . While this discussion was carried on, there existed another America. In it dwelt somewhere between 40,000,000 and 50,000,000 citizens of this land. They were poor. They still are.

To be sure, the other America is not impoverished in the same sense as those poor nations where millions cling to hunger as a defense against starvation. This country has escaped such extremes. That does not change the fact that tens of millions of Americans are, at this very moment, maimed in body and spirit, existing as levels beneath those necessary for human decency. If these people are not starving, they are hungry . . . (and) without adequate housing and education and medical care.

The Government has documented what this means to the bodies of the poor . . . but even more basic, this poverty twists and deforms the spirit. The American poor are pessimistic and defeated, and they are victimized by mental suffering to a degree unknown in Suburbia.”

(Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, 1962)

Unfortunately, more than four decades after Michael Harrington wrote these words, poverty is still an endemic problem in the United States. This is the case even though in 1964 President Lyndon Johnson committed the resources of this nation to a War on Poverty, and even after substantial economic growth in the decades of the Eighties and Nineties.

### **The Problem**

While the incidence of poverty has fallen since the 1960’s, the sheer number of people living at or near the poverty line is staggering, as journalist Katrina vanden Heuvel indicated in March 2008:

“One in eight Americans -- approximately 37 million people -- now live below the federal poverty line of \$19,971 for a family of four. (A woefully inadequate measure that is 42 years old and fails to account for basic necessities.) That's 4.9 million more people than in 2000 and the poverty rate for children is the highest of all age groups. Nearly 60 million people live just above the poverty line. Using the British standard of measurement, approximately 30 percent of Americans -- and 40 percent of American children -- are living in poverty.”

While the existence of the Social Security program has caused poverty among the elderly to fall to its lowest recorded level, poverty rates continue to be high among children and minorities, as a recent GAO Report indicated:

“In 2005, close to 13 percent of the total U.S. population—about 37 million people—were counted as living below the poverty line, a number that essentially

remained unchanged from 2004. Poverty rates differ, however, by age, gender, race, and ethnicity and other factors. For example,

- Children: In 2005, 12.3 million children, or 17.1 percent of children under the age of 18, were counted as living in poverty. Children of color were at least three times more likely to be in poverty than those who were white: 3.7 million, or 34.2 percent of, children who were African-American and 4 million, or 27.7 percent of, children who were Hispanic lived below the poverty line compared to 4 million, or 9.5 percent of, children who were white."
- Racial and ethnic minorities: African-Americans and Hispanics have significantly higher rates of poverty than whites. In 2005, 24.9 percent of African-Americans (9.2 million) and 22 percent of Hispanics (9.4 million) lived in poverty, compared to 8.3 percent for whites (16.2 million).
- Elderly: The elderly have lower rates of poverty than other groups. For example, 10.1 percent of adults (3.6 million) aged 65 or older lived in poverty." (GAO, *Poverty in America*, 2007)

While the number of people in poverty has remained relatively stable in the recent past, there has been an alarming growth of the number of people living in "abject poverty." This phenomenon is explained by Dr. Amy Glasmeier of Penn State University

"Recent Census estimates reveal that the population percentage considered severely poor has reached a 32-year high. Between 2000 and 2005, the percent living at half of poverty-level income increased by 26%. The descent into destitution spares no community or group in society. America's urban, suburban and rural communities are all witnesses to the growth of what adds up to the "abject poor."

The abjectly poor in America are individuals living on \$5,250 a year. ... This level of poverty in comparative terms is only slightly above the poverty line originally set in the 1960s and affords a person little more than food and shelter.

The \$5,250 for an abjectly poor individual means a bare bones budget of \$437/month. Of that total, no more than \$50 is available per week for food, or \$7.14 day—about two big Macs and a drink, or 1200-1600 calories a day and 120 grams of fat. The residual income supports a housing expenditure in the same range of \$200/month, which in most places in the country yields a bed in a group home, leaving about \$37 for incidentals.

Even more sobering is the fact that the number of severely poor is growing rapidly. In 1975 the severely poor were 30% of the population in poverty. Today a dismaying 43% of persons in poverty are severely poor by national standards. But more embarrassing than the share of the poverty population truly poor is the increase in the number of persons descending into severe poverty. While the rate of new entrants moving into poverty is somewhat stable, those who are becoming truly poor are increasing at a rate 56% higher than the growth rate of new entrants into poverty." (Glasmeier, 2007)

It seems obvious that the inability on the part of an individual or a family to afford anything more than basic food and shelter would lead to many other problems. For a variety of reasons, poverty has been linked to poor health:

The socioeconomic gradient in health has been observed across many different health outcomes, populations, and settings, including in the United States overall and within different racial/ethnic groups. One explanation is that variations in health behaviors by income, education, and occupational standing reflect differences in a range of socioeconomic resources in households and neighborhoods that can encourage and facilitate (or discourage and obstruct) healthier behaviors.

What are the implications for how we think about and address poverty in the United States? Poverty and "near poverty" (income up to twice the federal poverty guidelines) in the United States are prevalent and are associated with worse health outcomes among the population overall and among non-Hispanic whites and among blacks considered separately. These poor health outcomes may help explain the low ranking of the United States among affluent countries in life expectancy and infant mortality. (Braveman, 2007)

People living in poverty may, in some areas of the United States, be vulnerable to specific diseases that are generally not contracted by wealthier populations:

"...diseases very similar to those plaguing Africa, Asia, and Latin America are also occurring frequently among the poorest people in the United States, especially women and children. These diseases -- the "neglected infections of poverty" -- are caused by chronic and debilitating parasitic, bacterial, and congenital infections.

While most Americans have never heard of neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), the analysis estimates that these infections occur in hundreds of thousands of poor Americans concentrated primarily in the Mississippi Delta (including post-Katrina Louisiana), Appalachia, the Mexican borderlands, and inner cities. These diseases represent a major cause of chronic disability, impaired child development, and adverse pregnancy outcomes, yet many of them are preventable.

"The fact that these neglected infections of poverty represent some of the greatest health disparities in the United States, but they remain at the bottom of the public health agenda, is a national disgrace," says Peter J. Hotez, MD, PhD, author of the analysis and President of the Sabin Vaccine Institute, Executive Director of Global Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases, and Walter G. Ross Professor and Chair of the Microbiology, Immunology, and Tropical Medicine department at George Washington University.

Hotez notes that the common features of these neglected infections include their highly disproportionate health impact on minorities and people living in poverty; their chronic, largely insidious, and disabling features; and their ability to promote poverty because of their impact on child development, pregnancy

outcome, and productive capacity. He calls upon policy makers to make these infections a priority on the public health agenda.” (Science Daily, 2008)

Given the extent of the problem, there are two ways to look at the current efforts to alleviate poverty in the United States. The first is that the United States federal government spends hundreds of billions of dollars each year on programs designed to assist the poor:

“Currently, the federal government, often in partnership with the states, has created an array of programs to assist low-income individuals and families. According to a recent study by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the federal government spent over \$400 billion on 84 programs in 2004 that provided cash and noncash benefits to individuals and families with limited income. These programs cover a broad array of services: Examples include income supports or transfers such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and TANF; work supports such as subsidized child care and job training; health supports and insurance through programs like the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and Medicaid; and other social services such as food, housing, and utility assistance.” (GAO Report, 2007)

However, the nature of antipoverty programs has undergone a drastic shift. Of course, in 1996, President Clinton signed into law a measure ending the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, which was originated in 1935 as part of the Social Security Act, and had become the main means of distributing government monetary assistance to families living in poverty. AFDC was replaced by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF. According to The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities,

“Under the TANF structure, the federal government provides a block grant to the states, which use these funds to operate their own programs. States can use TANF dollars in ways designed to meet any of the four purposes set out in federal law, which are to: ‘(1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; (2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.’” (*An Introduction to TANF*, 2005)

Of course, the TANF requirements assume that the person receiving the assistance is able to work. However, according to the Urban Institute, this is often not the case:

“Many welfare recipients possess significant barriers to employment. In 2002, 42 percent of welfare recipients had not finished high school, 35 percent reported being in very poor health, and 30 percent had not worked in recent years. Other potential barriers to employment include the presence of an infant, language barriers, and the need to care for a child with disabilities. About two out of five welfare recipients (44 percent) had two or more barriers to work in 2002. The

share of recipients with multiple barriers remained fairly constant between 1997 and 2002.”

Even those who are able to work often find that having a job isn't enough to lift them out of poverty:

“The working poor and unemployed are working hard, but in most respects not moving ahead, the report concludes. While most of those surveyed report needing less than an additional \$200 per month to meet their family's needs, this amount of money represents a substantial increase in hours worked at low wages. The working poor and unemployed lack access to the critical paths of opportunity in the new economy—higher education, ongoing job training, job growth in suburban neighborhoods, childcare support, and information technology.”  
(*Working Hard But Staying Poor*, 1999)

During the Bush Administration, the trend has been to decrease funding for these programs, as noted by Myron Magnet in the *Wall Street Journal*:

“A glance at the administration's recent budget shows the ongoing dismantling of antipoverty programs: a sharp reduction in the Community Development Block Grant, the main conduit for funneling federal money to cities; the reduction in HUD money for Section 8 subsidized housing vouchers... and the shrinkage of ever-expanding Medicaid. Welfare is now temporary assistance in adversity, not a permanent way of life; and we can expect welfare reform's conditions to become even stricter when the 1996 Act finally gets reauthorized.” (WSJ, Feb. 5, 2005)

### Potential Solutions

The Center for American Progress released its Task Force Report on Poverty, *From Poverty to Prosperity: A National Strategy to Cut Poverty in Half*, in 2007. Here is a list of their major recommendations as well as the impact each would potentially have on reducing poverty in the United States:

“The United States should set a national goal of cutting poverty in half over the next 10 years. ...

We recommend 12 key steps to cut poverty in half:

1. Raise and index the minimum wage to half the average hourly wage. At \$5.15, the federal minimum wage is at its lowest level in real terms since 1956. The federal minimum wage was once 50 percent of the average wage but is now 30 percent of that wage. Congress should restore the minimum wage to 50 percent of the average wage, about \$8.40 an hour in 2006. Doing so would help nearly 5 million poor workers and nearly 10 million other low-income workers.
2. Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. As an earnings supplement for low-income working families, the EITC raises incomes and helps families build assets. The Child Tax Credit provides a tax credit of up to \$1,000 per child, but provides no help to the poorest families. We recommend tripling the

EITC for childless workers and expanding help to larger working families. We recommend making the Child Tax Credit available to all low- and moderate-income families. Doing so would move as many as 5 million people out of poverty.

3. Promote unionization by enacting the Employee Free Choice Act. The Employee Free Choice Act would require employers to recognize a union after a majority of workers signs cards authorizing union representation and establish stronger penalties for violation of employee rights. The increased union representation made possible by the Act would lead to better jobs and less poverty for American workers.

4. Guarantee child care assistance to low-income families and promote early education for all. We propose that the federal and state governments guarantee child care help to families with incomes below about \$40,000 a year, with expanded tax help to higher-earning families. At the same time, states should be encouraged to improve the quality of early education and broaden access for all children. Our child care expansion would raise employment among low-income parents and help nearly 3 million parents and children escape poverty.

5. Create 2 million new “opportunity” housing vouchers, and promote equitable development in and around central cities. Nearly 8 million Americans live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty where at least 40 percent of residents are poor. Our nation should seek to end concentrated poverty and economic segregation, and promote regional equity and inner-city revitalization. We propose that over the next 10 years the federal government fund 2 million new “opportunity vouchers” designed to help people live in opportunity-rich areas. Any new affordable housing should be in communities with employment opportunities and high-quality public services, or in gentrifying communities. These housing policies should be part of a broader effort to pursue equitable development strategies in regional and local planning efforts, including efforts to improve schools, create affordable housing, assure physical security, and enhance neighborhood amenities.

6. Connect disadvantaged and disconnected youth with school and work. About 1.7 million poor youth ages 16 to 24 were out of school and out of work in 2005. We recommend that the federal government restore Youth Opportunity Grants to help the most disadvantaged communities and expand funding for effective and promising youth programs—with the goal of reaching 600,000 poor disadvantaged youth through these efforts. We propose a new Upward Pathway program to offer low-income youth opportunities to participate in service and training in fields that are in high-demand and provide needed public services.

7. Simplify and expand Pell Grants and make higher education accessible to residents of each state. Low-income youth are much less likely to attend college than their higher income peers, even among those of comparable abilities. Pell Grants play a crucial role for lower-income students. We propose to simplify the Pell grant application process, gradually raise Pell Grants to reach 70 percent of the average costs of attending a four-year public institution, and encourage institutions to do more to raise student completion rates. As the federal government does its part, states should develop strategies to make postsecondary

education affordable for all residents, following promising models already underway in a number of states.

8. Help former prisoners find stable employment and reintegrate into their communities. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. We urge all states to develop comprehensive reentry services aimed at reintegrating former prisoners into their communities with full-time, consistent employment.

9. Ensure equity for low-wage workers in the Unemployment Insurance system. Only about 35 percent of the unemployed, and a smaller share of unemployed low-wage workers, receive unemployment insurance benefits. We recommend that states (with federal help) reform “monetary eligibility” rules that screen out low-wage workers, broaden eligibility for part-time workers and workers who have lost employment as a result of compelling family circumstances, and allow unemployed workers to use periods of unemployment as a time to upgrade their skills and qualifications.

10. Modernize means-tested benefits programs to develop a coordinated system that helps workers and families. A well-functioning safety net should help people get into or return to work and ensure a decent level of living for those who cannot work or are temporarily between jobs. Our current system fails to do so. We recommend that governments at all levels simplify and improve benefits access for working families and improve services to individuals with disabilities. The Food Stamp Program should be strengthened to improve benefits, eligibility, and access. And the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program should be reformed to shift its focus from cutting caseloads to helping needy families find sustainable employment.

11. Reduce the high costs of being poor and increase access to financial services. Despite having less income, lower-income families often pay more than middle and high-income families for the same consumer products. We recommend that the federal and state governments should address the foreclosure crisis through expanded mortgage assistance programs and by new federal legislation to curb unscrupulous practices. And we propose that the federal government establish a \$50 million Financial Fairness Innovation Fund to support state efforts to broaden access to mainstream goods and financial services in predominantly low-income communities.

12. Expand and simplify the Saver’s Credit to encourage saving for education, homeownership, and retirement. For many families, saving for purposes such as education, a home, or a small business is key to making economic progress. We propose that the federal “Saver’s Credit” be reformed to make it fully refundable. This Credit should also be broadened to apply to other appropriate savings vehicles intended to foster asset accumulation, with consideration given to including individual development accounts, children’s saving accounts, and college savings plans.

Many of these proposals, or combinations thereof, could be the basis for affirmative plans on a debate topic addressing poverty.

### The Federal Role

While poverty is a compelling topic, it is important to consider the appropriate role of the federal government in alleviating the economic distress of its citizens. As indicated previously, the federal government spends over \$400 billion annually on programs to benefit the poor and near poor. However, in the context of policy debate, it's reasonable to ask whether most debates on this topic would devolve into a contest between a federally implemented plan advocated by the affirmative and a state counterplan proposed by the negative. This will certainly be the case in many debates, especially in areas where there is a widespread belief that it is appropriate for the negative to propose a state counterplan that implements the exact affirmative plan at the state level. However, there will be some arguments in favor of a primary role for the federal government in the fight against poverty.

James D. Weill, President of the Food Research and Action Center, explained the resource advantage enjoyed by the federal government:

In many ways only the federal government has the economic, fiscal, political, and moral resources to lead and to act. We all may condemn how FEMA responded to Hurricane Katrina, but few believe that New Orleans can be rebuilt, with no major federal help, by private, city, and state action. We all may bemoan the stagnant and declining wages of recent decades. The falling national minimum wage contributed to that, but state and local minimum-wage and living-wage laws are unlikely to reach broadly enough to substitute for a better federal minimum wage or for national strategies to revive wage growth. We all may be deeply disturbed by the growing numbers of uninsured people, and a handful of states are considering major initiatives to expand coverage, but, even as many states are undertaking retrenchment of existing coverage, ultimately confronting the problem—or letting it worsen—will fall to the national government. We may be appalled by federal budget cuts in low-income programs, but few expect states or charities—least of all do the states and charities themselves expect—to make up those losses. (Weill, 2006)

Weill also argues that by drawing attention to the problem, the federal government alone is capable of making the elimination of poverty a truly national goal:

“If economic insecurity and poverty were trivial matters, the federal government would not need to become heavily involved. But they are not trivial matters. The damage that poverty, unequal opportunity, and material deprivation inflict on people is deeply injurious to our democracy as well as our economy—one key reason that they must be a matter of fundamental concern to the society as a whole and compel a national response.

Those issues that America cares about and is serious about tackling receive a national response. Having federal attention is not just a matter of marshaling resources; it is also an ongoing statement about the centrality of the issue and the needs of those affected in our national value system. It raises the ranking

of an issue in the hierarchy of the nation's concerns and makes it a matter of sustained and extensive concern.

Symbolically as well as programmatically and organizationally, when something matters to our society, the federal government is assigned important tasks. Thus a preeminent federal role is a national political and moral statement about poverty and economic security.

One part of that statement has to reflect a societal commitment to some national minimum standard of well-being. All people who live in this country, wherever they live, should have access to certain essentials in life. Too much inequality from state to state subverts the post-Civil War concept of the nation and subverts our political and economic roles in the world."

Finally, Weill cites several examples of the unique impact the federal government can have on several aspects of antipoverty policy:

"A full discussion of these roles is beyond the scope of this article, but consider the impact on poverty, opportunity, and economic security of just the examples on the following list:

- The balance struck by the Federal Reserve Bank, in managing interest rates and the money supply, between keeping the inflation rate low versus pushing toward full employment and keeping the economy growing rapidly and real wages increasing. The highest poverty rates in the last forty years were in the early 1980s when unemployment skyrocketed as "the Fed" drove up interest rates to control inflation.
- The role of federal fiscal as well as monetary policy in stabilizing the economy and limiting the depth of recessions and the growth of unemployment.
- The federal government support for or hostility to labor organizing.
- The level of the federal minimum wage.
- The federal rules regarding bankruptcy and the extent to which destitute individuals and families can get a fresh start or are enmeshed in endless debt.
- The regulation of private pensions and the extent to which the government strengthens that system or allows pension underfunding and corporate bankruptcy laws to undercut security for workers when they retire.
- The extent to which the government does or does not tax the earnings of low-income people and thereby deepen or alleviate their poverty.
- Whether the government protects workers against job and earnings loss when family circumstances, such as the birth of a child or a spouse's or child's illness, interrupt the ability to work.
- How the federal government defines overtime eligibility and overtime pay.
- The ways in which tax policy subsidizes housing, health care, child care, and other basics and work supports, and the degree of subsidy at different income levels.
- Federal immigration policy and labor and public benefits policy for immigrants.
- The scope, strength, and level of enforcement of civil rights laws, including

laws requiring equal pay and fair credit.

- The definition of which political, civil, and economic rights receive special protection under the Constitution.
- The way in which the federal government defines poverty and counts the number of poor people—this going far toward shaping public attitudes as to how widespread poverty is and how deep the deprivation involved is.

In all of these areas the federal government has the predominant role. In some areas it has an exclusive role according to the Constitution. In others its exclusive authority is not constitutionally mandated, but, when it acts, it preempts state action. In yet other areas it may not be preemptive, but it still became a dominant or important presence in the twentieth century as the national ideal evolved and the economy changed.

The federal government is the indispensable player in redressing poverty.”  
(Weill, 2006)

## NFHS CRITERIA FOR DEBATE TOPICS

### Resolutions:

1. That the United States federal government should substantially increase the social safety net for all United States citizens in poverty.
2. That the United States federal government should substantially increase financial assistance and/or social services to all United States citizens in poverty.
3. That the United States federal government should substantially increase public assistance to legal residents living in poverty in one or more of the following areas: food, education, housing, medical care, income maintenance, social services.
4. That the United States federal government should establish a comprehensive antipoverty program throughout the United States.
5. That the United States federal government should substantially increase one or more of its antipoverty programs.
6. That the United States federal government should substantially increase social services to all United States citizens in poverty.
7. That the United States federal government should substantially increase cash and/or noncash benefits to all United States citizens in poverty.

**Timeliness:** Poverty has been an issue in the United States since the founding of the nation. It has been a focus of government concern for over 70 years. While the election of a new President may bring about some changes in poverty policy at the federal level, neither candidate has given any indication that a comprehensive anti-poverty program would be at the top of their agenda. In short, there will certainly be a poverty problem to debate about throughout the 2009-2010 school year.

**Scope:** While poverty is a problem that may vary in severity in extent in different regions, it is also a problem that exists everywhere. Poverty affects all segments of the population, without regard to age, race, ethnicity, or gender.

**Range:** The issues on a poverty topic will engage both novice and advanced debaters. A debater needn't have an extensive knowledge of debate theory to debate about the potential benefits and disadvantages of antipoverty programs. However, those with more advanced knowledge will be able to delve into many different counterplan and critique strategies, as well as more sophisticated economic arguments.

**Quality:** Depending on the wording of the topic, there is potential for concern here. A broader topic, giving the affirmative the ability to advocate expansion of benefit programs as well as

changes in tax and labor policy, would certainly provide a year's worth of quality debates for all students. A more focused topic, restricted to increasing social services, could be somewhat limiting.

**Material:** In response to the relatively recent events in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there has been quite a bit of media coverage of the poverty issue. Poverty has also been the subject of several recent Congressional hearings and governmental analyses. Every private think tank that deals with domestic issues has published materials on poverty. In addition there are a number of academic and private organizations devoted to the poverty issue. Since poverty is also a fundamental economic problem, there is also a substantial amount of academic economic literature discussing the causes and potential solutions for poverty.

**Interest:** This is a topic that should draw student interest. Students are generally interested in economic conditions and the causes of economic problems. It is certainly an important topic, and one which it would be beneficial to have students debate about for a year. In addition, it is possible that this topic would draw the interest of students who live at or near the poverty level.

**Balance:** There will be a good variety of affirmative and negative arguments. Affirmatives will be able to advocate different approaches and programs to alleviate poverty, as well as focusing on specific populations in poverty. They will also be able to argue for comprehensive approaches. Negatives will have advantage-specific attacks on the extent of poverty, poverty trends, and solvency arguments. Disadvantages will include spending, politics, federalism and inflation. The state counterplan will be popular, and private action may also be an option. Exclusion counterplans will also be run. Negatives will also have a wide range of critical arguments regarding capitalism, racial and gender identity politics, and objectivism among others.

## DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

### “Social safety net”

Wikipedia.org:

“The social safety net is a term used to describe a collection of services provided by the state, such as welfare, unemployment benefit, universal healthcare, homeless shelters, the minimum wage and sometimes subsidized services such as public transport, which prevent individuals from falling into poverty beyond a certain level.” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_safety\\_net](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_safety_net), accessed 7/27/08)

Martha R. Burt, Urban Institute, 2000:

“The concept of the social safety net entered the public policy arena during the early 1980s, as changes initiated by the Reagan administration sought to streamline government programs while maintaining supports for people termed “the truly needy” (Burt and Pittman 1985; Palmer and Sawhill 1982, 1984). The purpose of a safety net is to protect people from ultimate harm. **By implication, a social safety net comprises a set of programs, benefits, and supports designed to ensure that people do not lack the basic necessities of life—shelter, food, physical safety, health, and a minimum level of financial resources. A social safety net may go even further by ensuring that people have the means to change the circumstances that put them at risk. Job training, child care, and/or child support services are examples of safety net programs that help people move toward economic self-sufficiency.**

Most of the largest federal safety net programs are results of the Social Security Act. Social Security and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)<sup>1</sup> were original titles under the act when it first passed in the 1930s as part of the New Deal. Other major components were added in the 1960s as part of the War on Poverty, including Medicare, Medicaid, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The Food Stamp program originated with the Food Stamp Act of 1977. Some of these safety net programs (Social Security, Medicare) operate as social insurance; eligibility is not dependent on low income. They are, however, largely restricted to disabled people and people ages 65 and older, leaving out most families with young children in the home. The remainder are “means-tested,” that is, applicants must be and remain under a certain income level to qualify. Except for the Food Stamp program, the qualifying income levels are well below the federal poverty level (FPL), and *net* household income must be at or below the FPL to qualify for food stamps. During 1996-1997, the period of interest for this paper, anyone who qualified could receive benefits from these means-tested programs for as long as they met the eligibility criteria; the programs operated as open-ended entitlements. For qualifying families with children, the combination of AFDC, food stamps, and Medicaid provided the basic federal safety net.

**This paper focuses on specific elements of the social safety net, including income support programs such as AFDC, TANF, general assistance (GA),**

**and food stamps; Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) and other non-welfare-specific employment and training programs; the child support system; child care assistance; child welfare services; and Medicaid and other publicly supported health insurance for low-income families.** These programs were selected for several reasons, including their historic linkages and their anticipated linkages under TANF. Historically, families receiving AFDC have been categorically eligible for Medicaid, and many states developed combined application procedures for AFDC, Medicaid, and food stamps. JOBS is specifically a work-readiness program for AFDC recipients, and states have been obliged to provide child care for any AFDC recipients required to participate in JOBS. Medicaid and child care have also been important transitional benefits to which many families leaving welfare were entitled for specified periods of time. PRWORA changed the relationships among these programs, in some instances delinking them and in others increasing the support requirements for current and former TANF recipients.”

(The Social Safety Net at the Beginning of Federal Welfare Reform: Organization of and Access to Social Services for Low-Income Families, January 1, 2000

<http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=309309>)

Amy Yarbrough, Policy Studies Journal, 2007:

**“The social safety net in the United States is a system of programs and policies that provide mechanisms to assist individuals when they are unable to cover basic and vital living expenses for themselves. A panoply of programs falls within the scope of the social safety net including bankruptcy, the Social Security system, Medicaid, Family Medical Leave Act, welfare payments, food stamps, subsidized housing, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and any other kind of programs, insurance or otherwise, that provide compensation for disability, medical expenses, or old age** (Gifford, 2006; Landry & Yarbrough, 2007). Although these programs all logically fall under the larger umbrella of the social safety net, no consistency exists in either the administrative or legislative entities that govern them. For example, while bankruptcy policy is largely determined on a federal level with little input from state lawmakers, the Medicaid program is jointly administered by the state and federal governments with the state governments taking responsibility for most programmatic changes. As a result of the fragmented structure of the social safety net, intergovernmental relations are critical to the appropriate maintenance and functioning of the overall system.”

**“social services”**

BusinessDictionary.com, 2007.

“social services -- Definition: Benefits and facilities such as education, food subsidies, health care, and subsidized housing provided by a government to improve the life and living conditions of the children, disabled, the elderly, and the poor in the national community.”

(Retrieved July 23, 2008 from BusinessDictionary.com.)

MERRIAM WEBSTER ONLINE DICTIONARY, 2008.

“social service: an activity designed to promote social well-being; specifically : organized philanthropic assistance (as of the disabled or disadvantaged)”

Retrieved July 23, 2008 from [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com).

Word Web Online, 2008.

“Social service: An organized activity to improve the condition of disadvantaged people in society.” (Retrieved July 23, 2008 from [www.wordwebonline.com](http://www.wordwebonline.com).)

OECD, Glossary of Statistical Terms, 2008.

“Services, social: Social (and collective) services provide final consumption for households and are distinctive for their non-market character in most OECD countries. Collective consumption decisions and public financing are common, as is production by governments, non-profit organisations and subsidised private organisations. Social services comprise the following International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC) Rev. 3 sub-groups: government proper (civil or military); health services; educational services; miscellaneous social services.”

(Retrieved July 23, 2008 from <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/search.asp>.)

Scott M. Michelman, 2002.

From the first days of George W. Bush's administration, "faith-based initiatives"-- efforts by the federal government to broaden funding and support for the charitable efforts of religious organizations--have been a central component of the President's domestic agenda.<sup>n1</sup> Specifically, the Bush White House has lobbied Congress to pass legislation that would expand federal funding to religious **social service** providers.<sup>n2</sup> In response, the House of Representatives passed the Charitable Choice Act of 2001 ("CCA").<sup>n3</sup> The CCA authorizes religious organizations to receive federal funding for providing **social services ranging from hunger relief efforts and housing assistance to juvenile delinquency treatment and crime-prevention programs**.<sup>n4</sup> Under the bill, religious organizations may receive funding either via a government grant to run a **social service** program, or by accepting vouchers that the government has issued to aid beneficiaries to redeem for **social services**.<sup>n5</sup> The CCA also exempts recipient religious organizations from laws prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of religion.<sup>n6</sup>

(Harvard Journal on Legislation, Summer, 2002, 39 Harv. J. on Legis. 475)

Japan Ministry of Health, Education, & Welfare, 2008.

“The "social policy" or "social services" have a wide range of meaning: income security, medical care (called "national health service" in the United Kingdom), personal social services, housing policies, education and employment.”

(Retrieved July 23, 2008 from [www.mhlw.go.jp](http://www.mhlw.go.jp).)

Adversity.Net, May 2008.

“The term Social Services definitely means different things to Conservatives and to Liberals. Benefits or entitlements bestowed by social services programs may include "free" medical care and "free" or "inexpensive" housing.

Democrat / Liberal Definition: Social Services are taxpayer-supported programs which give many expensive benefits to "disadvantaged" (minority) members of society. Democrats (liberals) believe that minorities and "historically disadvantaged" members of society are entitled to a minimum lifestyle which should be funded by the presumably "more privileged", hard-working, productive, tax-paying members of this society.

Republican / Conservative Definition: Social Services = Welfare! These programs are taxpayer-supported programs which give benefits (entitlements) to non-productive members of society at the expense of productive members of society. Such programs provide reduced-fee medical services and reduced-fee housing to individuals who are not full participants in our economy. These "social services" represent a significant drain on the productive members of society in terms of higher taxes.”

(Retrieved July 23, 2008 from [www.adversity.net](http://www.adversity.net))

### “public assistance”

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

“Public assistance: Any one or combination of the following welfare or social services programs: AFDC, General Assistance, Medicaid, SSI, Food Stamps, etc.” (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/systems/ncands/ncands98/glossary/glossary.htm>)

Thefreedictionary.com:

“public assistance: n. Aid, such as money or food, given to homeless and other financially needy people, the aged, or the inhabitants of a disaster-stricken area; relief.” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/public+assistance>)

### “assistance”

General Services Administration, April 2008:

“A "Federal domestic assistance program" may in practice be called a program, an activity, a service, a project, a process, or some other name, regardless of whether it is identified as a separate program by statute or regulation. It will be identified in terms of its legal authority, administering office, funding, purpose, benefits, and beneficiaries.

"Assistance" or "benefits" refers to the transfer of money, property, services, or anything of value, the principal purpose of which is to accomplish a public purpose of support or stimulation authorized by Federal statute. Assistance includes, but is not limited to grants, loans, loan guarantees, scholarships, mortgage loans, insurance, and other types of financial assistance, including cooperative agreements; property, technical assistance, counseling, statistical, and other expert information; and service activities of regulatory agencies. It does not include the provision of conventional public information services."

(Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance, GSA, April 2008,

<http://12.46.245.173/cfda/cfda.html>)

### **“comprehensive antipoverty program”**

Herbert J. Gans, 2007:

“In these dark days when almost no one in Washington talks about poverty, **“A National Strategy to Cut Poverty in Half” is a welcome and comprehensive anti-poverty program.** It also contains an implicit four-part strategy which is worth analyzing briefly because it is both a typical and an apolitical strategy.”

(quoted extensively above; Poverty and Race Research Action Council, July/August 2007, *Poverty and Race*,

[http://www.prrac.org/full\\_text.php?text\\_id=1138&item\\_id=10635&newsletter\\_id=94&header=Poverty+%2F+Welfare](http://www.prrac.org/full_text.php?text_id=1138&item_id=10635&newsletter_id=94&header=Poverty+%2F+Welfare))

Emily Dossett, 2000:

“While it’s encouraging that lawmakers are starting to realize that hard work should be rewarded, raising the minimum wage to \$6.15 still doesn’t lift families out of poverty. **A more fitting solution would be federal legislation that raised the minimum wage as part of a comprehensive anti-poverty program.** This solution would not only help to alleviate poverty for working families, it would eliminate the economic argument that areas with living wage laws would lose business to areas in the country without them.”

(Sojourners Magazine, January/February 2000,

<http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0001&article=000141f> )