



Written by [Walter E. Williams](#) on February 12, 2014

Dependency, Not Poverty

There is no material poverty in the U.S. Here are a few facts about people whom the Census Bureau labels as poor. Dr. Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, in their study "[Understanding Poverty in the United States: Surprising Facts About America's Poor](#)," report that 80 percent of poor households have air conditioning; nearly three-quarters have a car or truck, and 31 percent have two or more. Two-thirds have cable or satellite TV. Half have one or more computers. Forty-two percent own their homes. Poor Americans have more living space than the typical non-poor person in Sweden, France or the U.K. What we have in our nation are dependency and poverty of the spirit, with people making unwise choices and leading pathological lives aided and abetted by the welfare state.



The Census Bureau pegs the poverty rate among blacks at 35 percent and among whites at 13 percent. The illegitimacy rate among blacks is 72 percent, and among whites it's 30 percent. A statistic that one doesn't hear much about is that the poverty rate among black married families has been in the single digits for more than two decades, currently at 8 percent. For married white families, it's 5 percent. Now the politically incorrect questions: Whose fault is it to have children without the benefit of marriage and risk a life of dependency? Do people have free will, or are they governed by instincts?

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There may be some pinhead sociologists who blame the weak black family structure on racial discrimination. But why was the black illegitimacy rate only 14 percent in 1940, and why, as Dr. Thomas Sowell reports, do we find that census data "going back a hundred years, when blacks were just one generation out of slavery ... showed that a slightly higher percentage of black adults had married than white adults. This fact remained true in every census from 1890 to 1940"? Is anyone willing to advance the argument that the reason the illegitimacy rate among blacks was lower and marriage rates higher in earlier periods was there was less racial discrimination and greater opportunity?

No one can blame a person if he starts out in life poor, because how one starts out is not his fault. If he stays poor, he is to blame because it is his fault. Avoiding long-term poverty is not rocket science. First, graduate from high school. Second, get married before you have children, and stay married. Third, work at any kind of job, even one that starts out paying the minimum wage. And finally, avoid engaging in criminal behavior. It turns out that a married couple, each earning the minimum wage, would earn an annual combined income of \$30,000. The Census Bureau poverty line for a family of two is \$15,500, and for a family of four, it's \$23,000. By the way, no adult who starts out earning the minimum wage does so



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for very long.

Since President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty, the nation has spent about \$18 trillion at the federal, state and local levels of government on programs justified by the “need” to deal with some aspect of poverty. In a [column](#) of mine in 1995, I pointed out that at that time, the nation had spent \$5.4 trillion on the War on Poverty, and with that princely sum, “you could purchase every U.S. factory, all manufacturing equipment, and every office building. With what’s left over, one could buy every airline, trucking company and our commercial maritime fleet. If you’re still in the shopping mood, you could also buy every television, radio and power company, plus every retail and wholesale store in the entire nation.” Today’s total of \$18 trillion spent on poverty means you could purchase everything produced in our country each year and then some.

There’s very little guts in the political arena to address the basic causes of poverty. To do so risks being labeled as racist, sexist, uncaring and insensitive. That means today’s dependency is likely to become permanent.

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