



Redefining “Poverty” to Benefit the Welfare State

Each of us may have his own idea of what poverty means — especially those of us who grew up in poverty. But what poverty means politically and in the media is whatever the people who collect statistics choose to define as poverty.

This is not just a question of semantics. The whole future of the welfare state depends on how poverty is defined. “The poor” are the human shields behind whom advocates of ever bigger spending for ever bigger government advance toward their goal.

If poverty meant what most people think of as poverty — people “ill-clad, ill-housed, and ill-nourished,” in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s phrase — there would not be nearly enough people in poverty today to justify the vastly expanded powers and runaway spending of the federal government.



Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation has for years examined what “the poor” of today actually have — and the economic facts completely undermine the political rhetoric.

Official data cited by Rector show that 80 percent of “poor” households have air-conditioning today, which less than half the population of America had in 1970. Nearly three-quarters of households in poverty own a motor vehicle, and nearly one-third own more than one motor vehicle.

Virtually everyone living in “poverty,” as defined by the government, has color television, and most have cable TV or satellite TV. More than three-quarters have either a VCR or a DVD player, and nearly nine-tenths have a microwave oven.

As for being “ill-housed,” the average poor American has more living space than the general population — not just the poor population — of London, Paris and other cities in Europe.

Various attempts have been made over the years to depict Americans in poverty as “ill-fed” but the “hunger in America” campaigns that have enjoyed such political and media popularity have usually used some pretty creative methods and definitions.

Actual studies of “the poor” have found their intake of the necessary nutrients to be no less than that of others. In fact, obesity is slightly more prevalent among low-income people.

The real triumph of words over reality, however, is in expensive government programs for “the elderly,” including Medicare. The image often invoked is the person who is both ill and elderly, and who has to choose between food and medications.

It is great political theater. But, the most fundamental reality is that the average wealth of the elderly is some multiple of the average wealth owned by people in the other age brackets.



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on August 3, 2011

Why should the average taxpayer be subsidizing people who have much more wealth than they do?

If we are concerned about those particular elderly people who are in fact poor — as we are about other people who are genuinely poor, whatever their age might be — then we can simply confine our help to those who are poor by some reasonable means test. It would cost a fraction of what it costs to subsidize everybody who reaches a certain age.

But the political left hates means tests. If government programs were confined to people who were genuinely poor in some meaningful sense, that would shrink the welfare state to a fraction of its current size. The left would lose their human shields.

It is certainly true that the elderly are more likely to have more medical problems and larger medical expenses. But old age is not some unforeseeable misfortune. It is not only foreseeable but inevitable for those who do not die young.

It is one thing to keep people from suffering from unforeseeable things beyond their control. But it is something else to simply subsidize their necessities so that they can spend their money on other things and leave a larger estate to be passed on to their heirs.

People who say they want a government program because “I don’t want to be a burden to my children” apparently think it is all right to be a burden to other people’s children.

Among the runaway spending behind our current national debt problems is the extravagant luxury of buying political rhetoric.

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