



Epilogue

Child Poverty and Welfare Reform

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Before beginning a caveat is in order. It can be misleading to examine issues of child poverty and welfare reform within a narrow context that fails to consider the broader issues of wealth and power. The United States is an enormously wealthy and prosperous country. Millions of Americans live in abundance. Privately held wealth is estimated to be more than 25 trillion dollars. But the wealth is unevenly distributed. Some families have achieved enormous wealth and its attendant advantage while others have been left out.

Discussions of welfare are difficult because they expose and highlight our fundamental views on fairness and equity. How can millions of children in the United States live in such destitution and poverty as is found in many of our large urban and even rural communities? With such great wealth, it is difficult to understand all the hoopla raised about the costs of welfare. The money the Federal government spends on AFDC represents less than one-thousandth of the nations wealth. Yet, major efforts are afoot to reduce this piddling amount. Liberals who defend the interests of the poor and are accused of sponsoring behavior that perpetuates poverty. But even the liberals are unsure of their support for the poor. The poor are powerless—they rarely vote and are unable to contribute to financing campaigns. The children of the poor are at the mercy of public goodwill which may be no match to the conservative forces powered by wealth and influence allied against them.

Why all the hoopla over the poor? They have no wealth and receive almost no income. I think there is a larger reason and it needs to be recognized and examined. With the end of the cold war we have lost our main enemy. Since the collapse of communism the new enemy has become the poor—mainly welfare mothers and their children. The main threat the poor present is financial. Federal spending on AFDC is less than 15 billion dollars a year of a total federal spending that exceeds \$1,500 billion (or less than 1 percent). The poor have nothing and receive very little (see Figure 1).

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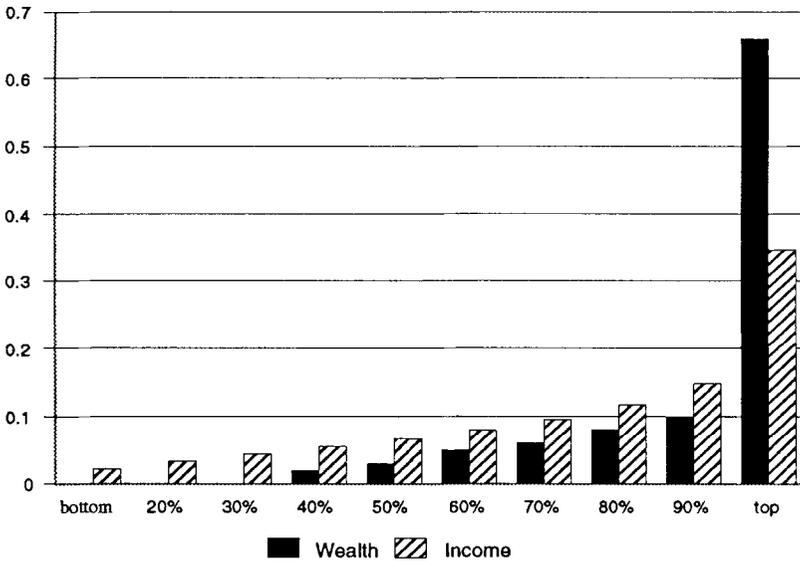


Figure 1
Distribution of Wealth and Income in the United States by Decile.

Source: Extrapolated from Avery, Elliehausen, & Cammer (1984a,b); Chawla (1990); Congressional Budget Office (1992); Gramlich, Kasten, & Sammartino (1994, 238); Rose (1992).

The poorest 10 percent in the United States have no wealth and their actual income is less than one-fifteenth of the top ten percent. Yet some analysts suggest that the problem in the United States is that “the poor sit in the wagon and make the rest of us pull.” Thus, they simply ask that the poor get out and help pull. Yet it is the poor who staff the low end jobs that pay less than poverty level wages (Handler, 1995). The poor do the menial and hard labor.

Why are the poor such a highly emotional concern? After all, they have nothing and what they get from the government is minuscule compared to the benefits provided other groups. Moreover, focusing on the poor diverts attention from the major problem facing the United States and that is the increasing disparity between rich and poor and the decline of the middle class. During the last decade the United States has experienced moderate economic growth. If all citizens had participated in this economic growth, the incomes of the middle class would have risen substantially. But the middle class did not share in the economic growth. The median income in the United States has remained virtually unchanged during the decade. According to research by Paul Krugman (1992) at MIT, the new wealth created during the last decade went to the top, while the middle class gained nothing. The top 10 percent received 94 percent of the new wealth, while the bottom 90 percent shared the remaining 6 percent.

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