

17.523 Essay 2: American Poverty

The United States is a country with vast diversity. Americans have a wide range of opinions, personalities, and cultures, and differ in socioeconomic status and how this manifests itself in everyday life. It is the responsibility of the U.S. government to create policy for this diverse group of people. Policymakers can either decide to write policy that benefits one specific group or to write policy that benefits everyone. Social activists have studied the benefits of both for many years and made arguments for both sides. In my opinion, the more successful policy is one that benefits people of all socioeconomic groups because it will gain wider support since more people benefit, allowing it to last longer and have a better chance to improve the life chances of poor black people living in American urban centers.

William Julius Wilson, author of *When Work Disappears* and *The Truly Disadvantaged*, suggests a framework of long-term and immediate solutions to help poor people. His long-term solutions place emphasis on the “the relationship between employment and education and family support systems, and in the metropolitan context, the relationship between the cities and the suburbs” (Wilson, 208). Wilson suggests an improved educational system and more interaction between the cities and the suburbs as specific long-term solutions. His immediate solutions aim to “either revise current programs or create new programs to decrease joblessness among disadvantaged adults” (Wilson, 208). He recommends job placement centers as a specific immediate solution.

In *When Work Disappears*, Wilson offers the educational systems of industrial democracies like Japan and Germany as models for the U.S. Their policies established a performance standard for students to meet before they can graduate from secondary school. This policy increased the number of workers with “higher-order thinking skills,” meaning they are better prepared, regardless of their socioeconomic background, to compete in the job market and be successful in technical training schools and other kinds of postsecondary education. By creating a national standard for education in the U.S., the government would be forced to assess the quality of struggling public schools and develop programs, such as teacher development and equal allotment of resources, to help them improve. With these programs, students, regardless of race or class, would ideally have more equal access to a good education, which would lead to better preparation and more opportunities after graduation for jobs and postsecondary education.

In my opinion, this idea is not guaranteed to be successful. President Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” policy attempted to set national standards for public education by offering more funding to schools as a reward for doing well in reference to certain criteria (e.g. graduation rate) established by the government. This policy has been largely unsuccessful in improving the public school system because it does not offer struggling schools any support to improve. The success of this idea depends on implementation, meaning whether or not the government creates a support system for all schools to improve and maintain success.

Wilson also suggests that by increasing the interaction between suburbs and cities, the life chances of poor black people living in American urban centers can be improved. He suggests that the U.S. do this by restoring the federal contribution to the city budget

and increasing the employment opportunities. This would help because by increasing the city budget, public transportation to the suburbs could be improved and more businesses could be brought to the city. These improvements would create more employment opportunities, helping poor neighborhoods become financially stable. According to Wilson, there is evidence that cities and suburbs are economically interdependent. Without a thriving urban center, the surrounding suburbs will, over time, experience a decline in growth and financial stability. Without access to the surrounding suburbs, people living in urban centers will have greatly decreased employment opportunities, which will eventually lead to increased poverty and financial instability.

I agree with this idea because Washington, D.C. is an example of how cooperation between the suburbs and cities affects the two. The positive side can be seen when looking at the thousands of people who commute to the city every day in cars and public transportation to get to work. For the most part, the places where these commuters live and the areas where they work are thriving financially. The negative side can be seen when looking at the areas of Washington, D.C. where there is very minimal public transportation and very few businesses. These areas and the immediately surrounding suburbs are not thriving financially and are largely comprised of low-income families. Interaction between suburbs and cities is beneficial for both areas and improves the life chances of poor black people living in American urban centers.

As an immediate solution, he suggests the creation of job placement centers that get potential employees “job-ready.” Job placement centers would be beneficial because employers would be confident that these candidates “understand and appreciate employer expectations such as showing up for work on time and on a regular basis, accepting the

orders of supervisors, and so on” (Wilson, 224). Having job placement centers in the inner city would also help improve the informal job information network that is meant to keep people informed of job openings not advertised publicly, but that is lost as more and more people in a community lose work.

I agree with this idea because it would help eliminate assumptions the employer might have about the candidates from the job placement centers. Interviewing with someone who has not already assumed negative things about a candidate’s abilities would improve that person’s chances of getting and maintaining a job. This success would benefit the candidate and the candidate’s community, by helping support the informal job network.

Wilson has many good suggestions for how to solve the many problems faced by poor blacks in America’s urban centers. Many of them, if implemented in a way that the poor and non-poor benefited, would be successful. It is important though that the programs are implemented in a way that allows them to benefit the poor and the non-poor, because, in the last century, it has been seen that universally-targeted programs are much more successful (i.e. they last longer and impact more people) than programs targeted at poor people.

The War on Poverty is an example of a targeted antipoverty program that was largely unsuccessful and not well received by the public. Started in the early 1960s, the War on Poverty was a series of programs targeted at helping poor people become more financially stable. The programs included Food Stamps, Medicaid, housing subsidies, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children. According to *American’s Hidden Success*, a study by John Schwarz, “economic expansion between 1965 and 1972 lifted out of poverty only about one-tenth of the 21.3 percent of Americans who were below the poverty line in

1965. Government programs, on the other hand, lifted above the poverty line more than half of the remaining number” (Skocpol, 3). While these programs succeeded in helping many poor people, they could not maintain broad support among non-poor Americans, namely politicians. Presidents Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan successively cut funding for these social programs, largely as a result of political attacks from angry Democratic leaders. They did not want to support programs supported by people, mostly Democrats, who were hostile towards their administration. By the 1970s, public opinion had significantly decreased for government aid to minorities and public social programs. Support especially decreased for programs stigmatized as being targeted at poor blacks. The War on Poverty failed because the majority of the country saw it not as a benefit, but as a burden, in that they paid taxes to support the programs but saw no personal reward.

On the other hand, universally-targeted programs have been much more successful. One such example is the Civil War veteran’s benefits policy. Between the 1870s and early 1900s, veterans’ pensions, disability, and survivors’ benefits were given out on a large scale to men who could prove that they had served in the Union army. According to “Social Policy: Fighting Poverty without Poverty Programs” by Theda Skocpol, by 1910, approximately 29 percent of American men over age 65 received benefits. While there were ethnic differences in the distribution of the benefits (i.e. pensions went to native-born Northerners and northern and central Europeans who had come to the North before the 1860s, and not to blacks and southern and eastern European immigrants who had fought for the Union army), the veterans that did receive benefits ran the gamut of class, from those who were economically disadvantaged to those who had been successful during their working lives. Participation in this program was seen as honorable by veterans and non-

veterans alike, and received support from both the Republican and Democratic parties. At the height of its success, Civil War benefits reached more than 90 percent of surviving veterans. This universally-targeted program was successful because it benefited the advantaged and disadvantaged, gaining it support from people of different socioeconomic backgrounds and political affiliations.

Social programs that benefit people of different classes and ethnicities have been seen in recent history to be much more successful than programs specifically targeted at poor people. This occurs because more people, namely policymakers, can “positively relate” to the purpose of and need for the program. Needs, such as veteran benefits, child support, job training, and child-care assistance, that affect advantaged and disadvantaged Americans are universal and can be understood by people of all different backgrounds. Universally-targeted programs benefit people of all classes and races, gaining them broader support and a better chance to improve the life chances of poor black people living in American urban centers.

Works Cited

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Wilson, William Julius. *When Work Disappears*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.