



No Safe Way to Fall: America's Declining Social Safety Net

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America likes to bill itself as a land of opportunity, yet that is not always the case. Over 15% of the United States population lives in poverty, making it one of the poorest developed countries today. Of those, many are Black and Latino, and many are single mothers. Those living below the poverty line are at a greater risk for homelessness, exacerbated by the lack of social safety net in contemporary America. Indeed, America's lack of a social safety net, fed by its cultural ethos of rugged individualism, is likely one of the factors creating the rise in homelessness today.

Beginning in the 1980s, America's once strong social services net was systematically whittled away as politicians, wishing to consolidate resources, slashed programs that helped the poor. In 1996, President Clinton did away with Aid to Families with dependent children, a popular social services program that had been running since the early 1900s and what most people thought of as "welfare." Its replacement, TANF, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, almost immediately suffered from problems AFDC had never shown. For instance, under the old system, recipients had no time limit for receiving payments; now, they faced a five-year window.

The new rules in place regarding federal funds toward the poor had loopholes allowing states to divert that critically important money toward other projects—and away from keeping people off the streets. The levels of funding, themselves set in 1996, have not been adjusted for inflation even as the dollar continues to rise. Families receiving TANF funds must demonstrate their attempts at applying for work—however, college is *not* covered in many states, leaving many individuals relying on TANF trapped in low-paying jobs. All these problems, and more, contribute to a lack of protection for the poor in the United States—a lack of protection that can be fatal if a crisis leaves a family suddenly unable to pay for housing. (Potts, 2016)

However, that is not the only cut in the United States' welfare program. In most states, food stamps do not cover the costs of eating *healthily*—they only cover the costs of eating. Many recipients lead lives of cheap processed food, which not only leads to increased mortality rates, but also drastically increases the medical expenses each family must bear. Work requirements for assistance programs often fail to take into account the

fact that many disabled individuals are simply unable to work, or unqualified for the jobs that they are able to perform. (Potts, 2016)

There remains a significant lack of adequate protection for young people aging out of the foster care system, of whom nearly half wind up on the streets. LGBT+ young people often face discrimination and rejection from their families; and, with no adequate federal system in place to protect them, wind up homeless. Many of the welfare programs that remain fail to take into account the fact that many of the poorest households are headed by single mothers, who struggle to provide for themselves and their children at the same time. In many areas, the minimum wage is simply incapable of covering the cost of housing, food, and other basic necessities. As Seattle City Councilman Mike O'Brien said, "I've got economically zero unemployment in my city, and I've got thousands of homeless people that actually are working and just can't afford housing. There's nowhere for these folks to move to." (CBS Sacramento, 2017)

In conclusion, the American social safety net is in desperate need of reform. We stand at the top of the list among developed countries in homelessness rates, and unless necessary social change happens swiftly, this problem will only continue to grow.

Sources

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