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# In Hard Times, Americans Blame The Poor

By Alfred Lubrano  
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**February 16, 2010 "Philly Online"** -- Last month, Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer of South Carolina said that when the government helps the poor, it's like people feeding stray animals that continually "breed."

And just last week, Colorado state legislator Spencer Swalm said poor people in single-family homes are "dysfunctional."

Both statements riled some Americans from the Piedmont to the Rockies and underscored a widely held belief: In tough times, people are tough on the poor.

In an April 2009 poll by the Pew Research Center in Washington, 72 percent agreed with the statement that "poor people have become too dependent on government assistance programs." That's up from 69 percent in 2007.

"The economic downturn has made the middle class less generous toward others," said Guy Molyneux, a partner at Hart Research Associates, a Washington firm that researches attitudes toward the poor. "People are less supportive of the government helping the poor, because they feel they're not getting enough help themselves.

"It's a divided country, splitting on a fault line: those who think the poor are poor because they don't try enough, and those who think the poor simply need help."

Matt Wray, a sociologist at Temple University, agreed: "Hatred of the poor is fueled by the middle class's fear of falling during hard times."

Americans don't understand how the poor are victimized by a lack of jobs, inefficient schools, and unsafe neighborhoods, experts say.

"People ignore the structural issues - jobs leaving, industry becoming more mechanized," said Yale sociologist Elijah Anderson, renowned for his study of the Philadelphia poor. "Then they point to the poor and ask, 'Why aren't you making it?'"

Americans tend to blame the victim, according to Angela Sutton, 33, of Northeast Philadelphia. "People think we like mooching off the system, and don't see the circumstances that put us here," said Sutton, who was shot in the stomach at 14 and raped by a relative the next year while growing up in North Philadelphia.

A former welfare recipient, Sutton is an unmarried mother of two children living on disability insurance and food stamps. "They think we're lazy and want a free ride."

Talk radio has especially galvanized against the poor.

In June, conservative Rush Limbaugh denigrated food stamps, which hunger experts have said are vital to poor children.

With "food care," as Limbaugh put it, the "obese" poor "buy Twinkies, Milk Duds, potato chips, six-packs of Bud, then head home to watch the NFL on one of two color TVs and turn off their cell phones, and that's poverty in the U.S." (What he didn't say is that food stamps can't be used to buy alcoholic beverages.)

Underlying negative attitudes toward the poor, experts say, are prejudices toward minorities, who are disproportionately among the indigent.

Twenty-five percent of African Americans, 23 percent of Latinos, and 9 percent of whites live in poverty. Overall, 13 percent of the U.S. population is poor. In Philadelphia, it's closer to 25 percent.

The United States "is very heterogeneous with very little ability to empathize with groups that are poor," said Washington economist Isabel Sawhill. That general lack of empathy can inspire anger toward the poor, especially from the right, experts say.

"It's easier to send money to Haiti because you don't have to relate to them directly," said Mariana Chilton, hunger expert and professor of public health at Drexel University.

To be sure, several conservatives decried Bauer's "stray animals" statement. "Many Republicans get the messaging wrong and fail to sound compassionate toward the poor," said Jeff Coleman, a former Republican Pennsylvania state representative who now runs Churchill Strategies, a Harrisburg firm that represents conservative causes. "What Bauer said was shameful."

The central issue for many conservatives, Coleman said, is that churches and not government should be caring for the poor.

Locally, people often respond with vitriol when stories about the poor appear in the media, Chilton said. In e-mail responses to her anti-hunger project, Witnesses to Hunger, Chilton said she often sees the word breeders used to describe unwed mothers on welfare.

Steve Raiken, 45, a former mechanic who fell on hard times and is now on welfare with his wife and two children in Gloucester City, said harsh talk against the poor "doesn't bother me a bit. I don't worry what people say. I've got enough problems."

But Raiken, who spends his days volunteering at a local food pantry, did say he believed that those who criticize welfare might not fully understand it.

Experts agree.

Welfare rolls are down around 60 percent since the mid-1990s, when welfare was switched from an entitlement to a work program that requires recipients to have jobs, said Ron Haskins, who drafted the so-called welfare-reform bill of 1996 as the Republican staff director of the U.S. House Ways and Means committee.

In Pennsylvania, enrollment in welfare (now known as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) dropped from 486,985 in 1996 to 217,820 last December, with 75 percent of the recipients children, according to the Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center. In New Jersey, TANF rolls fell from 91,364 in 1997 to 36,738 in 2009, state officials said. Throughout the country, around 4 million people are on welfare, government figures show.

"It's not a way of life," said Kathryn Edin, a Harvard University poverty expert who lived two years in Camden.

Despite belief to the contrary, welfare is a small payout that's difficult to attain, experts say. "You only get TANF if you're poor, poor, poor," said Linda Blanchette, deputy secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. "A mother and two kids get around \$403 a month. You have to work or be in job training 30 hours a week, and there's a five-year limit. Who wants this?"

There is, some say, a deep American anger toward the poor for violating the near-sacred belief that all people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. It's connected to a notion, rooted in Puritanism, "that the poor must have done something wrong because they weren't blessed by the heavens, as the prosperous are," Blanchette said.

Michael Geer, president of the conservative Pennsylvania Family Institute in Harrisburg, doesn't disagree: "Taxpayers who have money taken from them end up with a sense of disgust with people receiving the help," he said.

Some also believe that many welfare recipients cheat.

"The myth of the Cadillac-driving welfare queen" who defrauds the system lingers even though there's no proof of it, said Erin O'Brien, a poverty expert at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

In fact, welfare fraud among Philadelphia's 95,456 recipients is "minute," according to Peter Berson, assistant chief of the government fraud unit in the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office.

The 200 to 400 cases of welfare fraud in the city each year - down 50 percent since 2002 because of better enforcement and fewer recipients - are not nonworking women having babies to game the government, but working women receiving welfare and working at other jobs without reporting the income, Berson said.

Pennsylvania receives a \$719 million federal block grant for TANF cash assistance and related programs; New Jersey gets around \$200 million, government figures show.

Some lawmakers are attempting to codify the anti-poor sentiment. Pennsylvania State Rep. Garth Everett (R., Lycoming) has tried for a year to pass a law that would have TANF recipients drug-tested and fingerprinted, a practice in some states. "People's wallets are tighter these days, and they don't want funds going to folks with drug problems," he said.

Asked to back up his claims, Everett said, "I don't have evidence that people are using it [TANF money] to buy drugs. I do get feedback from a significant part of my constituency that they have the feeling that folks on welfare are using drugs." He added that his proposed bill "is not going anywhere" because Democrats oppose it.

Attendant to complaints about people on welfare are criticisms of unwed women having babies.

"Unplanned childbearing contributes to poverty," said Sawhill, the economist. Others disagree. "Having a kid is not the problem," O'Brien said. "Growing up in poverty is."

Regardless, many people say they cannot understand why women in poverty have children out of wedlock.

For women living in a depressing world of severely limited means and hopelessness, a child "makes you feel loved and wanted," said Sutton, the Northeast mother of two. "Mostly, we don't love ourselves and make bad choices."

Ashley Ortiz, 24, a currently employed, formerly impoverished single mother with a 3-year-old son in Northern Liberties, said young women often "don't have the building blocks others have to make an easier life, and what do you do when all you know is the example given you?"

Interestingly, said Edin of Harvard, 72 percent do eventually marry by their 30s.

While hostility toward the poor may be on the rise, there is a growing sense that a dismal economy will move even the middle class toward poverty. Some ask: Will Americans hate them as well?

"When you can work the minimum wage and still be poor," said Meg Bostrom of Topos, a Washington research group, "when people don't get paid sick leave, when jobs are scarce, and when inequality between the rich and working class grows, well, you're making conditions for poverty. Poverty doesn't just happen. And the hardest workers in America will continue to struggle."

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