

# Let's recapture the Lyndon Johnson vision of helping the poor help themselves

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 Latest in a series of posts about the Community Engagement Initiative 

*Bud Hackett is a Bethlehem resident who raised 4 kids in the City. He recently became very interested in quality of life issues in the city and hopes to offer a balance to the approach City Council is taking.*

ref: **“Bethlehem Council Should Learn from the Past about Social Programs”**

## Review of the 50 Years of Federal Programs

At the federal level, President Johnson launched the “War of Poverty” in January 1964. He declared “unconditional war on poverty in America.” Since then, the taxpayers have spent **\$22 trillion** on Johnson’s war. Adjusted for inflation, that’s three times the cost of all military wars since the American Revolution.

Johnson had to politically overcome, being less popular than Kennedy, managing a very unpopular Vietnam War and the civil unrest that occurred before and after Martin Luther King’s death – he needed to do something.

According to a **2014 report by Robert Rector**, who is a senior research fellow in the DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at The Heritage Foundation, government spent \$943 billion dollars providing cash, food, housing, and medical care to poor and low-income Americans. (That figure doesn’t include Social Security or Medicare.) More than 100 million people, or one-third of Americans, received some type of welfare aid, at an average cost of \$9,000 per recipient.

Rector’s article summarizes a U.S. Census Bureau annual poverty report:

- 2013, 14.5 percent of Americans were poor. (The same poverty rate as in 1967, three years after the War on Poverty started.)

- Census counts a family as poor if its “income” falls below certain thresholds. But in counting “income,” Census ignores almost all the \$943 billion in annual welfare spending.
- Government’s survey: 80 percent of poor households have air conditioning; nearly two-thirds have cable or satellite television; half have a personal computer; 40 percent have a wide-screen HDTV. Three-quarters own a car or truck; nearly a third has two or more vehicles.
- Ninety-six percent of poor parents state that their children were never hungry at any time during the year because they could not afford food.
- Some 82 percent of poor adults reported that they were never hungry at any time in the prior year.
- The average consumption of protein, vitamins, and minerals is virtually the same for poor and middle-class children and in most cases is well above recommended norms.
- Less than 2 percent of the poor are homeless. Only 10 percent live in a mobile home.
- The average poor American lives in a house or apartment that is in good repair and not over-crowded. In fact, the average poor American has more living space than the typical non-poor individual living in Sweden, France, Germany, or the United Kingdom.
- For a decade and a half before the War on Poverty began, self-sufficiency in American improved dramatically. But for the last 45 years, there has been no improvement at all. Many groups are less capable of self-support today than when Johnson’s war started.
- The culprit is, in part, the welfare system itself, which discourages work and penalizes marriage. When the War on Poverty began, 7 percent of American children were born outside marriage. Today the number is 41 percent. The collapse of marriage is the main cause of child poverty today.
- The welfare state is self-perpetuating, welfare creates a need for even greater assistance in the future.
- in 2014, President Obama announced plans to spend \$13 trillion over the next decade on welfare programs that will discourage work, penalize marriage, and undermine self-sufficiency.

The author suggests that rather than repeating the mistakes of the past we should return to Johnson's original goal. Johnson sought to help the poor help themselves. He aimed to free the poor from the need for government aid, rather than to increase their dependence. That's a vision worth recapturing.

Bud

*to be continued . . .*