

SNG-Trends in dependency scary-4-20-15

Is America becoming the dependent society?

By Jim Nowlan

I am invited to give talks to Lions, Rotary, women's and other clubs, generally about Illinois and, particularly, its budget problems.

In recent talks, during the question period, several listeners have observed that we could save taxpayer money if we took the "undeserving" off the welfare rolls.

Then the audience members illustrated with anecdotes of local cases they "know" of people who are abusing our several welfare programs.

Anecdotes certainly don't prove a case, but they do illustrate alarming trends in the growth of dependency of Americans on our government.

For example, one audience member, who rented properties, told of a woman, "smart and capable," with four children, who received substantially more than \$2,000 a month in rental payments (\$882), food stamps (\$775), heating, phone and other benefits.

"The kids have everything," she said, "and the boyfriend lives in the house." Work for this woman would probably mean a reduction in income.

Another audience member said she had just returned from visiting family in northern Mississippi where "most of the men were 'on disability.'"

This could be either Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), two different federal programs. I have heard that alcoholism and obesity qualify a person for disability payments.

Many, maybe most, Americans think there are too many abuses like these, and they resent it. Nobody seems to know how much abuse there actually is, as the scores of different welfare programs are not well audited, if at all, from what I can tell.

Nor are all the government programs for the poor, I should add quickly. I have seen farmers in my area grow rich in \$14,000-15,000 an acre land as a result of decades of subsidy and safety net programs that provide regular checks as well as support for loans at the local bank.

And most of us know cases of families that transferred grandmother's assets to other family members years ago, so that she will be asset-poor and supported in the nursing home by Medicaid at \$30,000-plus a year.

The numbers of persons receiving "means-tested" or income related benefits began to increase with the War on Poverty programs of President Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s.

Writing in the *National Interest* this year, Nicholas Eberstadt reported that in 2012 more than 35 percent of Americans were taking home at least some benefits from means-tested programs, nearly twice the share in 1983.

One in six Americans lived in a home enrolled in the SNAP (old food stamp) program. Recipients of disability payments increased six-fold since 1983 in the SSI program, to 20 million, and by six-fold since 1970 in the SSDI program, to 9 million.

Again according to Eberstadt, between 1964 and 2014, the fraction of men between 25-34 who were neither working nor looking for work quadrupled, from less than 3 percent to more than 11 percent.

In 2012, half of all children under 18 lived in homes that received means-tested benefits.

Why the dramatic increases? For some, the benefits available beat working, at least in an economic sense. Good-paying jobs for non-college graduates are scarce.

In my rural all-white county, nearly half the births last year were to unmarried women, a sure-fire recipe for dependency at some point, maybe for a lifetime.

What can be done to reverse the trend lines, if anything?

Welfare programs certainly need to be audited, or audited better. For example, Illinois has recently been reviewing its Medicaid rolls for eligibility. About 300,000 persons (of 3 million enrolled) have already been removed from the rolls (though some may be restored).

Disincentives to work need to be turned into incentives. Instead of paying people more in benefits than they would earn working, use the government money to provide bonuses for work on a sliding scale that makes work pay, as some conservative think tanks have proposed.

The late, brilliant Democratic U.S. senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed that, “It cannot too often be stated that the issue of welfare is not what it costs those who provide it, but what it costs those who receive it.”

Too much dependency, for too long, weakens the national moral fabric, methinks.