

SNG-Is government replacing Dad-3-21-16

Is government replacing Dad?

By Jim Nowlan

Ever since I moved back to my rural hometown in central Illinois a few years ago, I have fretted about rural white poverty.

I think I see it at the local convenience store where disturbing numbers of scruffy, bearded young men pick up their beer and roar away in beat-up pickups. But that could just be generational distaste for new styles.

I do know that 44 percent of the children born this past year in Stark County, where I live, were born to unmarried women, which I find is about the state average.

The topic came to mind recently when I had lunch with old friend and circuit judge Mike McCuskey, of Lacon in nearby Marshall County. Mike rotates each week among three rural county courthouses, including Stark. Mike has also moved back to his rural roots after 16 years away as a federal judge.

“Jim, we have an epidemic of single mothers who never marry, with children often by multiple fathers,” exclaimed the judge over a Reuben and chips.

“Divorce used to be a big deal in our days growing up. Today there is no stigma.

“Now the mothers come into court seeking an order of protection for Jimmy from unmarried dad, to get the man out of the house, but not for Jennie or Joey—because they have different fathers!”

McCuskey goes on: “The mothers often don’t marry because they might lose their Medicaid card. Sometimes, they also get a child on disability payments because the tyke has a supposed learning deficit. It’s crazy what is going on in rural Illinois!”

[Of course, McCuskey sees the flotsam and jetsam of society in his courtrooms, which surely isn’t representative of our larger rural world.]

So I talked with two fine, big-hearted, veteran social workers I know in my home area to find out what they see.

“The big problem is the lack of decent jobs,” says one. “A single mother can’t make it on a minimum wage service job.”

“There is also less sense of responsibility among young men than there used to be,” the other chimes in. “I have seen young men who sit in front of the TV all day and say they could do better than an \$8.50 an hour job, but they don’t get off their duffs and look for those better jobs.”

“It’s easy to get frustrated in our line of work,” she adds, “but it is a myth that all people on government programs are shiftless beer-drinking smokers—at least half or more really want to get off welfare programs.”

“Our children are what they see. They’re going to become their parents. People who grow up paying for their groceries with a LINK card (food stamps in earlier days) don’t know any different.”

On the other hand, there are programs like Career Link that will basically pay a person a small amount to get a GED (high school diploma equivalent) and to go on to train for a welding or truck-driving job.

And my social worker friends have seen some successes in this regard.

Judge McCuskey and I may, of course, be seeing our childhoods through rose-tinted glasses, when we recall life being comfortable, with plenty of good-paying jobs down the highway at CAT and John Deere.

So I looked up poverty rates for Stark County. The poverty rate in 1960 was greater than 20 percent (my government source didn't say how much more) versus 12 percent this past year! Maybe the good ol' days weren't so great as I thought.

One reason for the decline in poverty rates is the panoply of social support programs created later in the 1960s through the War on Poverty of president Lyndon Johnson: Medicaid, food stamps, housing support, straight welfare, heating and electricity funding, free school lunches, child care, Head Start, and the earned income tax credit, not to mention the several local private charities in Stark County.

Females have thus found that they don't need a man, observes one of my social worker friends. But choices have consequences, she adds quickly.

I worry that we may be—clearly I have more research to do—creating among rural whites what neuroscientist Bruce Hood in the United Kingdom calls “learned helplessness” (*The Self Illusion*, 2012), the sense that individuals are unable to do anything about their lives.

I am definitely not expecting all young women today to strive for glorified Ozzie and Harriet family stability, though mothers do much better financially when married than they do alone.

On the other hand, I worry that too many poorly educated Moms have replaced Dad with the government, which is not a happy long-term coupling.

[I am out of space, but one of the social workers made a great suggestion. When a young mother achieves a job, don't immediately withdraw all the government supports, which we do.

Instead, wait three months until the mother is back on her feet and then slowly wean her off the government programs. It would be worth the investment.]