

OPINION | Guest Column

William F Felice

# The U.S. has cut poverty by almost half, but can this success be sustained? | Column

With the political will, our government reduce needless economic suffering and create real equality of opportunity for all.



An Eden Christian School pre-kindergartener signs a "Thank You" card in Brooksville in 2011 to raise awareness about Florida's School Readiness program. Child care is often the greatest cost impediment to economic stability for families with young children.

Amid the harrowing data about the ongoing COVID crisis, Americans finally received some good news. In a comprehensive study, the Urban Institute reports that the number of poor in our country is expected to fall 20 million this year from 2018 levels, a decline of almost 45 percent!

Poverty is projected to plummet from 13.9 percent in 2018 to 7.7 percent in 2021. The 2021 poverty threshold, which is the minimum level of income adequate for the basic necessities of life, is \$26,500 for a family of four. Thanks to government assistance, millions of our fellow citizens now have incomes above this level of impoverishment.

Experts note that the U.S. has never cut poverty so much in such a short period of time. Poverty has fallen among every demographic group — white, Black, Latino and Asian, and among every age group in every state. The most dramatic decline in poverty is among children. The Urban Institute projects that child poverty will drop from 14.2 percent in 2018 to 5.6 percent this year, a decline of 61 percent.



William Felice, Eckerd College [ File photo ]

Millions of families escaped poverty due to the massive increase in government programs to help the poor survive the pandemic-induced economic downturn, including stimulus checks, rent relief, increased food stamps and expanded unemployment. Expenditures for these programs are projected to rise to more than \$1 trillion.

Yet, the future of this increased safety net for the poor is very much in doubt. Some of these successful programs are already being phased out. For example, on July 31, the federal evictions moratorium expired leaving millions of Americans to face potential homelessness. If President Joe Biden's effort to extend the moratorium fails, over 3.6 million adults, including 2 million with children, are less than two months away from possible eviction.

Furthermore, many now argue that continued high spending on basic public goods to protect the poor is not only unsustainable, but actually hurts the poor in the long run by discouraging work and creating a "welfare state."

Yet, the truth is the opposite. Eliminating the "welfare state" is contingent on the government accepting the responsibility to protect and fulfill basic public goods for the poor. Why? Because the protection of public goods — food, housing, health care, etc. — opens up pathways for poor people, often for the first time, to fully develop their capabilities as productive, tax-paying citizens.

Living in poverty, on the other hand, most often denies this pathway as one's life is consumed with survival needs. For example, the only incentive for a desperately hungry person is to find food. Achieving access to basic public goods — food, housing, health care — creates motivational incentives to develop one's full potentiality. For the first time, the person who was destitute is now able to consider life's options. It becomes possible for this individual to become a full contributing member of society.

Furthermore, the overall protection of basic public goods does not stifle the economy or limit economic growth. On the contrary, attaining minimum economic security for all can strengthen the economy overall, as demonstrated in the Republic of Korea, Japan, Sweden, Denmark and elsewhere. There is no "trade-off" between investments in human beings and economic growth. In fact, investments in poverty reduction, unemployment insurance, education, and health care can create the conditions for economic expansion. Investments in basic human needs and public goods can enhance a nation's overall income and productivity.

The success of the pandemic relief programs demonstrates that with the political will, our government can act to reduce needless economic suffering and create real equality of opportunity for all.

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