

# FEDERAL POVERTY POLICY

## TOPIC PAPER

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## INTRODUCTION

Poverty in the United States is an ongoing seemingly intractable problem. The causes, and possible solutions to poverty are a continual source of debate. In particular, the programs that attempt to assist persons in poverty are constantly under scrutiny. For example, the recent effort to require drug testing as a condition of receiving benefits has been a prominent issue. The issues surrounding these programs range from policy details to broad outlines of how they operate to whether federal government anti-poverty programs should exist at all. This topic addresses the federal government's programs to assist persons in poverty and asks how (or if) these programs can or should be improved. The topic also intersects with other prominent policy areas including housing policy, health care policy and food security. These programs include Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)(formerly known as Food Stamps), Medicaid, public housing and the Housing Choice Voucher program. While this topic is constantly discussed, the amount of that discussion is likely to increase as the Trump administration considers potential fundamental changes to these programs. In addition, issues about access to health care and housing are constantly under discussion.

Poverty is an issue that affects all sectors of the United States. There is no area, urban or rural, that is not impacted by poverty. The focus on federal government anti-poverty programs allows for discussion of national approaches that can be debated in any part of the United States. In addition, both the health care debate and the lack of affordable housing are national problems that can be debated anywhere. Specific programs are the current way that the federal government addresses poverty. These programs attempt to address the material effects of poverty by providing income or food, and the structures that cause poverty by providing

affordable housing or affordable health care. In addition, these programs attempt to reduce poverty by addressing root causes of poverty by providing education, job training, domestic violence services, mental health services, and other services that attempt to overcome barriers to self-sufficiency. As a result, these programs attempt to address both transient poverty and chronic poverty. The extent and efficacy of these programs provides ground to debate both attempts to address the materials effects of poverty and underlying causes of poverty.

Poverty is an area that is accessible to all levels of debaters. Novice debaters can debate outlines of federal anti-poverty that are not difficult to understand. Novice debaters can also access other areas of social policy such as housing and health care in wide-ranging ways that are easily accessible. Varsity debaters can explore policy details for an array of both affirmative areas and counterplans. Varsity debaters can also explore several critical approaches, including discussions of capitalism, race and governmental power.

Poverty policy is an area that will enable high quality debates. The issues are engaging. The combination of macro-level approaches, specific policies, and critical approaches will provide for a full year of debates without substantial repetition. The topic will expose students to general approaches to addressing poverty, specific anti-poverty policies, specifics of federal anti-poverty programs, and philosophical approaches to addressing poverty. These multiple approaches will allow for developing analytical and problem solving skills.

The topic will be balanced. Examples of affirmatives cases include: increasing availability of affordable housing, increasing access to health care for low income populations, allowing access to anti-poverty programs for persons currently excluded by immigration status, assisting domestic violence survivors, improving welfare-to-work programs, increasing nutrition programs to decrease hunger, increasing availability of anti-poverty programs for the disabled,

homelessness, increasing home health care/chore workers, giving the federal government control of TANF/end block grant, repairs to public housing, increasing funding for public housing or housing choice vouchers, zero tolerance policies in public housing, increasing funding for anti-poverty programs as economic stimulus, and decreasing poverty increases U.S. leadership.

Negative positions include: states counterplan, counterplans for other means to challenge poverty such as guaranteed income or increasing minimum wage, spending disadvantage, federalism disadvantage, welfare dependency, capitalism critique, biopower/social control critique, anti-blackness critique, counterplan to end welfare, private philanthropy counterplan, and block grant counterplan. For critical arguments, the literature about these programs contains specific arguments about whether they further the capitalist system by buying off resistance or empower low income persons to be able to challenge the system, and about how these programs implicate race relations and either further or challenge segregation. This literature will allow specific debates tied to the topic area instead of generic critical debates.

### PROPOSED RESOLUTIONS

There are several possible resolution wordings that can address federal poverty policy through discussion of particular programs:

1. The United States federal government should substantially increase funding and/or eligibility for one or more of the following: Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, public housing, and the Housing Choice Voucher program.

Wording 1 is the most specific and will be most successful in directing debates and narrowing the topic. The list of programs can be shortened or lengthened to make the topic

larger or smaller. The programs listed are currently the most important federal anti-poverty programs.

Wording 1 (and wording 2) do not use the word “poverty” because these programs each have different income eligibility standards. Several of these programs allow for eligibility above the federal poverty line. Use of the word “poverty” would therefore exclude debates about these federal programs.

Each of the proposed wordings includes increasing eligibility for programs. This is also because federal programs have various different eligibility criteria in addition to income or resources that the applicant or recipient has. These eligibility criteria include immigration status, work requirements, time limits, exclusions for drug felons or fleeing felons, limitations on eligibility for children born to parent who are program recipients and various other conduct requirements. Each of these eligibility criteria are important components of these programs and changing them would cause fundamental changes in the programs. These eligibility criteria embody decisions about various areas of social policy that provide good ground for debates.

2. The United States federal government should substantially increase funding and/or eligibility for its programs for low income persons in one or more of the following areas: income maintenance, nutrition assistance, health, housing.

2A. The United States federal government should substantially increase funding and/or eligibility for its programs for low income persons in one or more of the following areas: income maintenance, food assistance, health, housing.

3. The United States federal government should substantially increase funding and/or eligibility for its programs for persons in poverty in one or more of the following areas: income maintenance, nutrition assistance, health, housing.

3A. The United States federal government should substantially increase funding and/or eligibility for its programs for persons in poverty in one or more of the following areas: income maintenance, nutrition assistance, health, housing.

By including the word “poverty” wording 3 includes as negative strategies critiques of the rhetoric of poverty and criticisms of the way poverty is measured.

4. The United States federal government should substantially increase funding and/or eligibility for its programs for low income individuals or families in one or more of the following areas: income maintenance, nutrition assistance, health, housing.

Comments for suggestions 2-4: each uses wording to encompass the purpose of federal programs instead of particular programs. This means that suggestions 2-4 are larger topics. In addition to the programs listed in topic 1, these topics can also include Supplemental Security Income, any one of many United States Housing and Urban Development housing programs, Low Income Housing Tax Credit, HOME (another low income housing program) and Women, Infants and Children program. These additional programs will expand specific topic areas involving both disability (Supplemental Security Income) and race (a specific issue about the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program). These topics could also include programs not exclusively targeted at poverty but that help people in poverty including veterans’ benefits, Social Security Retirement, unemployment insurance and Medicare. In addition, these topics could include programs that are for persons in poverty but are less targeted including Community Development Block Grant and Community Services Block Grant, although inclusion of these programs could trigger effects topicality debates.

## DEFINITIONS

### poverty

“The state or condition of having little or no money, goods, or means of support; condition of being poor.” Dictionary.com, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/poverty>.

“The state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/poverty>.

“Condition where people’s basic needs for food, clothing and shelter are not being met. Business Dictionary, <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/poverty.html>.

“The condition of being without adequate food, money, etc.” The Free Dictionary, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/low-income>.

The United States Census Bureau has a formula for defining poverty. It is explained here <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/poverty-measures.html>.

The current federal poverty line amounts are here: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>.

### low income

“The report defines low-income working families as those earning less than twice the federal poverty line.” Population Reference Bureau, U.S. Low-Income Working Families Increasing, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2013/us-working-poor-families.aspx>.

“Not having or earning much money.” Cambridge Dictionary, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/low-income>.

“When someone makes under 25,000 a year they are considered 'low income'.” Urban Dictionary, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=low%20income>.

Several other definitions use the federal poverty line to define the term “low income.” For example: “‘Low-income family’ is a term tied to the measure of poverty in the United States.” <http://www.livestrong.com/article/206990-define-a-low-income-family/>.

#### income maintenance

“A government program that provides financial assistance to needy people so that they can maintain a certain income level.” Dictionary.com, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/income-maintenance>

#### nutrition assistance/food assistance

The terms nutrition assistance and food assistance are used in the literature but do not seem to be specifically defined. Using definitions of the common terms nutrition, food and assistance should work.

#### Temporary Assistance to Needy Families

“The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is designed to help needy families achieve self-sufficiency. States receive block grants to design and operate programs that accomplish one of the purposes of the TANF program.” United States Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/tanf>.

#### “What Is TANF?”

Congress created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, as part of a federal effort to “end welfare as we know it.” TANF replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which had provided cash welfare to poor families with children since 1935.

Under TANF, the federal government provides a block grant to the states, which use these funds to operate their own programs. In order to receive federal funds, states must also spend some of their own dollars on programs for needy families (they face severe fiscal penalties if they fail to do so). This state-spending requirement, known as the “maintenance of effort” (MOE) requirement, replaced the state match that AFDC had required.

States can use federal TANF and state MOE dollars to meet any of the four goals set out in the 1996 law: “(1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; (2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out of wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two parent families.” Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, Policy Basics: An Introduction to TANF, 2015, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-an-introduction-to-tanf>.

#### Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

“SNAP offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families and provides economic benefits to communities. SNAP is the largest program in the domestic hunger safety net. The Food and Nutrition Service works with State agencies, nutrition educators, and neighborhood and faith-based organizations to ensure that those eligible for nutrition assistance can make informed decisions about applying for the program and can access benefits. FNS also works with State partners and the retail community to improve program administration and ensure program integrity.” United States Department of Agriculture, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

#### Medicaid

“Medicaid is a joint federal and state program that helps with medical costs for some people with limited income and resources. Medicaid also offers benefits not normally covered by Medicare, like nursing home care and personal care services.” Medicare.gov, <https://www.medicare.gov/your-medicare-costs/help-paying-costs/medicaid/medicaid.html>.

“Medicaid is a health insurance program for low-income individuals and those with disabilities. Elderly low-income people are eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid. (Medicaid covers long-term care, so it can be used to fund nursing home stays for people who are eligible.) One of the provisions of the ACA was to expand Medicaid to cover additional low-income individuals and families, including childless adults. The federal government funds at least 90 percent of coverage for new enrollees in states that have opted to expand their Medicaid programs. The Supreme Court ruled that states could decide whether or not to expand Medicaid, so not all states are expanding their programs.

Medicaid is funded in part by the government and by the state where the enrollee lives. Learn more about Medicare benefits and eligibility.” Healthinsurance.org, <https://www.healthinsurance.org/glossary/medicaid/>.

### Public housing

“Public housing was established to provide decent and safe rental housing for eligible low-income families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Public housing comes in all sizes and types, from scattered single family houses to highrise apartments for elderly families. There are approximately 1.2 million households living in public housing units, managed by some 3,300 HAs. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administers Federal aid to local housing agencies (HAs) that manage the housing for low-income residents at rents they can afford. HUD furnishes technical and professional assistance in planning, developing and

managing these developments.” United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, [https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/topics/rental\\_assistance/phprog](https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/topics/rental_assistance/phprog).

“A program established by the United States government to provide housing for low-income families, disabled persons and the elderly. These families or persons must meet certain eligibility requirements to participate in the program and may be required to pay a nominal amount of rent. The Units are considered public because they are funded, owned and administered by government authorities.” Business Dictionary, <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/public-housing.html>.

### Housing Choice Voucher program

“The housing choice voucher program is the federal government's major program for assisting very low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled to afford decent, safe, and sanitary housing in the private market. Since housing assistance is provided on behalf of the family or individual, participants are able to find their own housing, including single-family homes, townhouses and apartments.

The participant is free to choose any housing that meets the requirements of the program and is not limited to units located in subsidized housing projects.

Housing choice vouchers are administered locally by public housing agencies (PHAs). The PHAs receive federal funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to administer the voucher program.

A family that is issued a housing voucher is responsible for finding a suitable housing unit of the family's choice where the owner agrees to rent under the program. This unit may include the family's present residence. Rental units must meet minimum standards of health and safety, as determined by the PHA.

A housing subsidy is paid to the landlord directly by the PHA on behalf of the participating family. The family then pays the difference between the actual rent charged by the landlord and the amount subsidized by the program. Under certain circumstances, if authorized by the PHA, a family may use its voucher to purchase a modest home.” United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, [https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/public\\_indian\\_housing/programs/hc/v/about/fact\\_sheet](https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hc/v/about/fact_sheet).

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## SUMMARY

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these programs range from policy details to outlines of how they operate to whether federal government anti-poverty programs should exist at all. This topic addresses the federal government's programs to assist persons in poverty and asks how (or if) these programs can or should be improved. The topic also intersects with other prominent policy areas including housing policy, health care policy and food security. Affirmative cases can include increasing availability of affordable housing, increasing access to health care for low income populations, allowing access to anti-poverty programs for persons currently excluded by immigration status, assisting domestic violence survivors, improving welfare-to-work programs, increasing nutrition programs to decrease hunger, increasing availability of anti-poverty programs for the disabled, homelessness, and increasing funding for anti-poverty programs as economic stimulus. Negative positions include: states counterplan, counterplans for other means of addressing poverty such as increasing minimum wage or guaranteed income, spending disadvantage, federalism disadvantage, welfare dependency, capitalism critique, biopower/social control critique, anti-blackness critique, counterplan to end welfare, private philanthropy counterplan and block grant counterplan.