

Parkland College

SPARK: Scholarship at Parkland

The Diana McDonald Writer's Challenge

Student Works

2021

Poverty, Privilege, Success, and Our Government

Zane Krile

Parkland College

Follow this and additional works at: https://spark.parkland.edu/mcdonald_award

Recommended Citation

Krile, Zane, "Poverty, Privilege, Success, and Our Government" (2021). *The Diana McDonald Writer's Challenge*. 13.

https://spark.parkland.edu/mcdonald_award/13

Open access to this Essay is brought to you by Parkland College's institutional repository, [SPARK: Scholarship at Parkland](#). For more information, please contact spark@parkland.edu.

Poverty, Privilege, Success, and Our Government

I grew up under two roofs due to my parents' divorce. My dad had custody over me, so, especially at first, I spent most of my life living with him. While my living conditions have never been horrible, they have certainly not been ideal or even customary. I spent almost a year with my dad at a prison ministry when I was three. From there, we moved into a very small house that was the size of one-bedroom apartment. My dad never struggled to provide food for me, but when it came to things like clothing and toys, it was all donated. While living in that house, I got reunited with my mom and started visiting her about every other week. She lived in East St. Louis in an area that has high crime rates. My mom lived in a nice sized one-story house. When it came to money, my mom was a little more privileged than my father. My mom worked as a nurse, so she had a decent income. But she was a single parent taking care of my older brother and sister, as well as me every other week. My mom has had Crohn's disease for as long as I remember, but there was a point when it became even more evident. When the disease would flare up, she would be bed-ridden for a week or so, causing her to miss work and even lose many jobs. The disease caused, and still causes, a financial burden. When my mom couldn't work, my sister would "work" in order to provide for the family. My sister didn't actually hold a legitimate job back then. She made money the way many people in our neighborhood made money—through drug dealing. Overall, my childhood has never been stable. As an outcome of living under such circumstances, I have grown to feel compassion for the many Americans who struggle to provide for themselves and their family.

Many Americans lack the opportunities that more privileged Americans take for granted, especially when it comes to employment. People seeking jobs can sometimes face

many obstacles during the process. For starters, there are many poor Americans who are willing and desperate to work but cannot find a job that can cover basic living expenses. Living in certain areas, particularly poor and dangerous neighborhoods, it can sometimes be impossible to even find a job that is close enough to commute to. Businesses, of course, want to be located in safe and “inviting” areas, not “the bad part of town.” It doesn’t help that many of these working poor (and job-seeking poor) don’t have a reliable means of transportation, therefore making it even harder for them to keep a job, let alone get a job.

Although plenty of rural whites live in such job deserts, it is black Americans who disproportionately live in these locations. Richard Thompson Ford, an expert on civil rights and antidiscrimination law, describes how federal government policies contributed to segregation and the formation of today’s urban black ghettos. Thompson states, “State-enforced racial discrimination created the ghetto: in the early 20th century local governments separated the races into segregated neighborhoods by force of law, and later, whites used private agreements and violent intimidation to keep blacks out of white neighborhoods.” The first public housing program for defense workers during World War I excluded African American workers. And two decades later, the first federal public housing for non-defense workers was segregated by race. Continual policies like these explain, in part, why many of our neighborhoods still look the same way they did back in the early twentieth century. Normalizing housing segregation also normalizes racial classifications. Black people are almost expected to be living among each other in the ghettos. The working poor often have a hard time getting themselves out of the economic “hole” they are in. For poor black people, that “hole” is even harder to get out of,

not only for the fact that many live in areas that are disconnected from mainstream society, but also simply due to assumptions made about them based on the color of their skin.

Even though society is supposed to be different today due to years of fighting for equality for all races, black people, as well as other populations, including women and Hispanics, face discrimination when applying for a job. There are many businesses who discretely, and presumably unconsciously, prefer workers that are white and male. Annie Lowrey, an economic and political journalist for The Atlantic magazine, states, “Low wage jobs are more likely to be held by women, people of color, and immigrants, all of whom have less political capital than their paler male peers.” If these minority groups, particularly those who live in the ghetto, do not have the opportunity to earn beyond the low wages that they seemingly are expected to earn, how can they move to better conditions with better opportunities? This, unfortunately, often leads to the next domino falling, which is resorting to unethical ways to make money, including drug dealing.

In many cases, as a result of not being able to support the household, fathers abandon the family. This then leads to psychological damage dealt on the next generation, potentially causing an endless cycle of not being able to “escape” the pathologies that are bred by poverty. Many of the signs of family and community dysfunction have become more common within white communities, making these obstacles less race related and more class related. But certainly, a higher percentage of Black Americans live amid such struggles.

A child growing up in a rich, privileged, family has vast advantages over a child growing up in a poor, “trapped” family. Typically, poor children grow up to be poor adults, and rich children grow up to be rich adults. Many children living in poor families lack the basic day-to-

day necessities that kids from the middle class and up take for granted. This includes food, water, electricity (heating, air conditioning, etc.), and arguably, a stable family life. These children tend to only have one parent looking after them (typically a single mother), a parent who tries their hardest earning minimum wage to make ends meet to support the family. Unfortunately, poverty tends to go hand-in-hand with various dysfunctional behaviors. As a young adult who has grown up with two divorced parents who abused drugs on and off, I know firsthand how it can cause psychological damage. When my mom and dad would be using at the same time, there were moments when I felt stuck because I didn't have a place to go to where I felt some sense of security or comfort. My dad always had high expectations when it came to me and schooling. For that reason, I have been an A and B student my whole life, but during those seasons when my parents would struggle with drugs, my grades began to drop. My dad, subconsciously, got angry at me, possibly not capable of realizing he was part of the problem. Nicholas Kristof, a New York Times Op-Ed Columnist, interviewed a 20-year-old woman, Bethany Underwood, who reported that her father was arrested for drug offenses before she was born, and her mother used methamphetamine when pregnant with her. Bethany was also sexually assaulted by a friend of the family and eventually relied heavily on pain medication. Bethany, when being interviewed by Kristof, said, "I began using marijuana at 9... By 14 she had graduated to injecting meth and became an addict. 'Getting drugs wasn't a problem because all my friends' parents did drugs,' she said. 'We would steal it.'" Later in the interview, Bethany also stated that she would consistently skip school and dropped out during her 8th grade year. She says she is stuck at a 3rd grade reading level. If the parents of the children struggle in all these different ways, the children tend to follow suit in the lifestyles of

the parents. If, as a society, we cannot always “save the parents” from their dysfunctions, there at least needs to be more efforts put towards helping the children—otherwise the endless cycle never breaks.

I acknowledge that the government can only do so much when it comes to lending a hand towards the less fortunate groups in America. The American people in poverty need to at least meet halfway with the services (public or charitable) extended to them. There needs to be an effort put forth that shows that these people are desperate enough for change. Having put forth effort to change one’s circumstances, but still being stuck is different than not trying to change the way one lives and yet still expecting more help. I have certainly seen how those who struggle can be their own worst obstacles. My mom inherited a decent sum of money from her stepfather a while back—yet within about four years, all of that inherited money went down the drain and she has very little to show for it. While it wasn’t necessarily help from the government, it was help from a source during a time she desperately needed it. Now my mom struggles to pay her water and electric bills each month. My mom received help, but could not bring herself to capitalize on it to improve her or her family’s life. Dr. Henry Louis Gates, a scholar at Harvard University, who grew up watching his father work multiple jobs at a time, talks about how he believes people, including black people, need to put forth more effort when it comes to schooling and working. Gates states, “I don’t have any tolerance for anybody who won’t work, if they can work. I don’t think there’s any excuse for not doing your homework. I don’t think there’s any excuse for not learning your ABCs and learning to speak standard English and learning your multiplication tables.” Gates continues by talking about how he views these values as having once been the “hallmark” of African American culture. I understand why

conservatives argue that efforts to extend help to people can often unintentionally harm people instead. Kay C. James, the President of the Heritage Foundation, believes that the welfare system is in desperate need of reformation. Criticizing the design of our welfare system, James states, “this approach rewards people for not working, for having kids out of wedlock, and for staying single.” James says that as a result of these policies, society has faced an increase in out-of-wedlock births and single-parent families, which traps many families in poverty.

However, while the people seeking and needing help need to meet the government halfway, the government needs to make it to that halfway point as well. The solution is not to reduce public efforts, the way some conservatives claim. Many of the public efforts are what people in poverty are benefitting from more than anything. We need to identify which programs are being effective and develop those further. The government has the power to create organizations and programs for the benefit of the American people. Going back to my personal story about my mom who inherited that large sum of money, perhaps if she would have been able to go through some sort of program that would have taught her better ways to handle and manage money, she wouldn't have had to worry about having enough money for the rest of her life. There are plenty of government programs that work but that are not invested in enough. According to Ron Haskins, an American political scientist, successful public expenditures include home visits to vulnerable families, K-12 education, pregnancy prevention, community college, and employment training. Haskins talks about the need for evidence-based efforts. Haskins states, “Rather than cut these programs, Congress should extend funding so that successful programs can expand to new sites while programs that are not working are

improved or abandoned. Social policy is too important to be left to guesswork.” He acknowledges that there is vast waste and even counter-productive programs, as Kay C. James also notes; but Haskins urges us not to make a blanket assumption that government efforts cannot be productive—we simply need to focus the efforts on strategies and programs that demonstrate effectiveness.

As the writer Eli Khamarov wrote, “Poverty is like punishment for a crime you didn’t commit.” As a society, we should be sympathetic to those who are living in what can feel like an inescapable abyss.

Works Cited

- Ford, Richard Thompson. "Book Review: More Than Just Race." *New York Times*. March 10, 2009
- Haskins, Ron. "Social Programs That Work." *New York Times*. Dec. 31, 2014
- "Henry Louis Gates Discusses Ideological Divides Among Black Americans." YouTube. Nov. 15, 2016
- James, Kay C. "Why We Must Be Bold on Welfare Reform." *The Heritage Foundation*. March 12, 2018
- Kristof, Nicholas. "3 TVs and No Food: Growing Up Poor in America." *New York Times*. Oct. 28, 2016
- Lowrey, Annie. "Don't Blame Econ 101 for the Plight of Essential Workers." *The Atlantic*. May 13, 2020