The History of the War on Poverty

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Social Welfare in America: Overviews and Early Histories up to the War on Poverty


Newman, Katherine S. and Elizabeth S. Jacobs. Who Cares? Public Ambivalence and Government Action from the New Deal to the Second Gilded Age. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. Examines public opinion about social policymaking from the New Deal to the present, arguing that there was not a groundswell of support for new policies to help the poor during the New Deal and the Great Society, but nor was there popular support for rolling back these policies in the 1980s and 1990s.


The War on Poverty

Primary Sources on the War on Poverty


the Moynihan Report, attracted criticism soon after it was circulated within the administration, though it was not widely available to the public for some time. Was controversial primarily because of Moynihan's focus on what he described as the “tangle of pathology” in African American communities, which he attributes primarily to the matriarchal family structure. Moynihan's primary policy recommendation was that the federal government needed to address lack of jobs for African American men. In it he also highlighted the break between unemployment rates and number of families receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children. On the lessons and legacy of the Moynihan report, see The Moynihan Report Revisited: Lessons and Reflections after Four Decades, Special Issue of the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, January 2009, available at: http://ann.sagepub.com/content/621/1.toc.


Tenbroek, Jacobus, ed. The Law of the Poor. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1966. Collection of essays originally presented at a conference at Berkeley, providing “a critical review of the rules and procedures, doctrines and presuppositions of the law applicable to the poor, primarily as that law is found in welfare codes, statutes, ordinances, programs and administration” (vii). Including essays on cash assistance, residence laws, vagrancy, public housing, child welfare, disability, and mental health services, among other subjects.

**Early Assessments and Reflections on the War on Poverty**


----- Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty. New York, 1970. Critiques the community action approach of the War on Poverty and the failure to develop a jobs program. “An immense opportunity to institute more or less permanent social changes—a fixed full employment program, a measure of income maintenance—was lost while energies were expended in ways that very probably hastened the end of the brief period when such options were open” (193, check citation, from Davies).


Piven, Frances Fox and Richard Cloward. *Regulating the Poor: the Functions of Public Welfare* (1971). Argues that Kennedy and Johnson had to address poverty, or inject federal dollars into inner cities, in order to pacify African Americans.


**Secondary Sources on the War on Poverty**


Chappell, Marisa. *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty and Politics in Modern American*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. Argues that the liberal anti-poverty coalition from the 1960s forward was wedded to the idea of the male breadwinner family, and worked to create male breadwinner families, especially among poor African Americans, at a moment when that model was becoming increasingly unrealistic.


Germany, Kent. *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. One of a number of recent books that looks at the War on Poverty from the bottom up. The Community Action Program in New Orleans is at the book’s center, and Germany argues that black activists used CAP as a base to challenge the South’s racist political culture. For other bottom-up accounts see especially Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirgian eds. *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History*.


**Social Welfare in America Since the War on Poverty**


Murray, Charles. *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*. 1984. Argues that a paradigm shift occurred the 1960s: as federal spending on social welfare increased, the new programs that resulted increasingly focused on equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity. Controversially suggests that these programs—the social policy of Great Society—are responsible for the increasing number and worsening circumstances of poor Americans.


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**Legacies: Recent Writings and Resources on the War on Poverty**


Goldfarb, Zachary. “Study: U.S. Poverty Decreased Over Last half-century thanks to safety-net programs” Washington Post, December 9, 2013. Links to study and LBJ speech and quotes from White House officials.


Meyer, Bruce D. and James X. Sullivan. “Winning the War: Poverty from the Great Society to the Great Recession,” NBER Working Paper No. 18718. “We find that moving from traditional income-based measures of poverty to a consumption-based measure (which we argue is superior on both theoretical and practical grounds) and, crucially, adjusting for bias in price indices leads to the conclusion that the poverty rate declined by 26.4 percentage points between 1960 and 2010, with 8.5 percentage points of that decline occurring since 1980.”


Sherman, Arloc. “Official Poverty Measure Masks Gains Made Over Last 50 Years,” September 13, 2013, CBPP.

Sherman, Arloc, Sharon Parrott, and Danilo Trisis, Chartbook: The War on Poverty at 50, January 6, 2014, CBPP.

Spotlight on Poverty, links to press coverage, events, etc: http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/50th_anniversaries.aspx

Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. “State of the Union: The Poverty and Inequality Report, 2014.”

Tax Policy Center, Urban Institute and Brookings Institution. “50 Years into LBJ’s War on Poverty, What’s the Role for Tax Policy”? An event on January 24, 2014. The link has video of the panel discussions and the keynote by Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, Jason Furman.


Other Bibliographic Sources, Resources and Archival Collections

Rutgers University Libraries has two bibliographies on the history of social welfare policies, one for pre-1930 and one for post-1930 policy. Both are very useful, with links to primary source documents that might be particularly helpful when teaching.

Georgetown University Law Library has a poverty law research guide: http://www.law.georgetown.edu/library/research/guides/poverty.cfm

The Social Welfare History Project has very useful encyclopedia-style entries on the people, events, organizations, and programs most important for understanding the history of social welfare in America.

Teaching the War on Poverty: Syllabi and Related Material

The National Poverty Center collects syllabi of courses on poverty policy and related topics: http://www.npc.umich.edu/opportunities/training/course/index.php


A new textbook on poverty law came out in 2014: Juliet Brodie, Clare Pastore, Ezra Rosser, Jeffrey Selbin, Poverty Law: Policy and Practice, Aspen, 2014. The front matter (preface and table of contents) is available from the SSRN. Poverty Law, Policy and Practice is the first new poverty law casebook in 17 years and only the second since 1976. With current literature from multiple viewpoints, the book provides an overview of the field, including cases, data and major government programs that map onto important theoretical, doctrinal, policy and practice questions. The book is designed to accompany a survey course, and an online teacher’s manual will be published soon.

A note on this bibliography

This bibliography is not exhaustive. Rather, the goal is to highlight 1) some of the most enduring scholarship on the War on Poverty and 2) the most recent work being done by social scientists, legal scholars, and historians on the subject. For context, we have included a list of useful sources on social welfare in America before and after the War on Poverty, as well as some recent analyses of the legacies of the War on Poverty.

Elisa Minoff started this bibliography, but she hopes others will add to it and improve it. If you would like to contribute citations and commentary, please e-mail Elisa at elisa.minoff@gmail.com. Elisa can either give you permission to edit the document directly...
or add your suggested citations herself.