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**Poverty Welfare : Opinions and Facts**

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Welfare: Opinions and Facts

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If a survey were to be taken to establish what people think the words "welfare" and "poverty" mean, there would probably be as many definitions as people asked. Not only are laymen unable to come to a decision on the definitions, but professionals as well find it difficult to agree on definitions that fully explain each of the words considering the many attitudes and values people hold today.

Poverty is a controversial word. Not everyone agrees on what it means. To some people poverty is measured only in terms of income. To others, poverty includes things that affect the mind and spirit of the individual such as housing, education, clothing, health services and the money to buy food.

Like poverty, welfare also has different meanings to different people. To some people "welfare is taking life easy in one of the government housing units with shag carpet, color TV's, Cadillacs and money to spend, while the rest of us working people work and pay taxes so they can have their easy life." In group discussions, someone will usually remark that "All welfare mothers hang out in bars and have illegitimate children just to increase their welfare check." Then there are those who believe that "Welfare is a social program to help other people, that of course the program is costly in terms of dollars, but not to have welfare is even more costly in terms of people."

Here in South Dakota you may have heard someone remark, "Oh, well, we don't really have to worry about welfare and poverty, after all that's only in the large cities—we're not really affected."
Poverty—Who and Where

It may surprise most Americans to know that, proportionately, there is more poverty in rural America than there is in our cities. According to Social Security poverty guidelines for urban and rural non-farm people, one in eight persons living in metropolitan areas live in poverty, the ratio is one to fifteen in the suburbs and one to four in the rural areas.

Nation as a Whole

Most poor families live in small towns and villages. Only one in four of these rural poor families live on a farm. And of the 14 million rural poor, 11 million are white. It is true that a higher proportion of Negroes than whites are poor—three in five rural non-white families are poor—but the total number of white poor is larger than the total number of black poor. At first, you may think that there are more blacks in poverty than whites. One of the reasons for this is that blacks are heavily concentrated in some areas. In fact, 90% of them are clustered in the poorest counties of America. Many of the low income whites go unnoticed. Part of the reason they go unnoticed is because they are more widely scattered.

South Dakota

According to the 1970 U. S. Census, 120,000 persons in South Dakota were living below the poverty level. The poor are scattered throughout the urban, non-farm and farm areas. In South Dakota the greatest number of poor are living in rural communities. Approximately 45,000 live in rural non-farm homes, 39,000 live on the farm and another 35,000 live in the urban areas.

About 30,000 persons in South Dakota receive assistance payments and another 16,000 make use of food stamps. This leaves 74,000 persons living below the poverty level that are not seeking or receiving assistance from the welfare offices through State or Federal programs. There are some, however, who receive assistance from the County Poor Relief Fund.

There are more white welfare recipients than Indian. Seventy-six percent of all welfare expenditures for the State-Federal programs, including medical care, go to non-Indian recipients. However, a greater proportion of the Indian population is receiving welfare than the white.

According to the 1970 census data, there were 32,402 Indians living in South Dakota, which represents 4.9% of the state's population. Of these 32,402 Indians, approximately 17,000 are considered living in poverty which is over 50% of the Indian population. While Indians are not the majority of the poor, they do have a disproportionate number living in poverty.

A recent publication by the State Department of Public Welfare, Research and Statistics, states that "While the census indicated that 7.1% of the state’s population under 18 years of age was of Indian descent, 46.4% of the Department's ADC child recipients were Indian. Also, despite the fact that the census data indicated that just 2% of those in South Dakota over age 65 are of Indian descent, 15% of the Department's Old Age Assistance recipients are Indian. Those of Indian descent also make up 18% of the Aid to the Disabled program, and 39% of the adults on the Aid to Dependent Children program."

Poverty—Why

The President's Commission on rural poverty said that poverty is "the lack of access to respected positions in society, and the lack of power to do anything about it. It is insecurity and unstable homes. It is a wretched existence that tends to perpetuate itself from one generation to the next." What they are really saying is that poverty produces poverty. One might conclude then that to eliminate poverty now, would assure us of no poverty in the future. But before anything can be eliminated, one must first know the causes and the conditions.

The causes and conditions of poverty are many and they are usually interwoven. If we were able to clearly identify a single cause or condition and attack it, a great deal of the problem could be eliminated. But the fact remains that there are many things that lead one to poverty and those same things tend to keep one there. Let's examine just some of the causes of poverty in South Dakota.

Cultural Conditions

Through years of cultural conditioning, South Dakotans generally believe in hard work and providing for oneself. Rural people often find it hard to recognize poverty or to understand it. Since they are used to working for themselves they find it hard to accept the idea that they or someone they know may depend entirely upon someone else for their support.

The size of the family itself often is an obstacle in overcoming poverty. In rural areas large families are traditional. This probably stems from the fact that large families were needed to help with the farm work. The result today is that in many situations the meager monies available are stretched even farther in order to feed, clothe, house and educate these children. Without the proper food, clothing, housing and education these children continue in the same footsteps as their parents. True, the birth rate has been decreasing since 1957, but the average number of births in the rural areas has not declined as rapidly.

Rural people tend to cling to the idea of caring for the old folks at home. Then when the children of these "old folks" go to the cities in search of employment, those who do stay behind have more dependents to support. The combination of few wage earners, low income, and more dependents creates an acute dependency problem.

Economics and Employment Conditions

In South Dakota the economy depends largely on agriculture and tourism. Competition for employment in these areas is great. Not only are the rural poor seeking these positions, so are the high school and college students.
Often there are more willing workers than there are jobs. Indians on the reservation live in poverty, in the main, with few opportunities for work at well paying jobs. Of the reservations, Indians often find it impossible to get a better paying job, if they are able to find one at all.

One segment of the South Dakota economy that retains a relatively constant employment pattern is government. The present trend seems to indicate a decrease in Federal government employment and an increase in State and local government employment. Even if government employment does continue in an upward direction, chances are great that the poor will not be able to compete for these positions as they will lack the educational and skill experiences necessary to enter the field.

Employment opportunities in rural areas are usually much more limited than in urban areas. There are some opportunities, however, for those who decide to combine farming with non-farm employment where the off-farm jobs are within a reasonable commuting distance. Such situations are not present in all localities and where they are, there are usually more persons seeking the jobs than there are openings.

Education
The President’s Commission also found that low educational levels seem to be self perpetuating. If the head of a rural poor family has little schooling, his children are often handicapped to acquire new skills or get new jobs and to otherwise adjust to the urbanization and fast growing pace of the world today. Usually, the less education completed, the poorer the job, and the lower the income. Minorities often suffer more from unemployment and under-employment than do the lower income whites. Minorities who remain in the rural areas are frequently unemployed and when they do find employment, they are found in wage work—seldom do they become rural farm operators.

Poverty—What Happens Next

There are some individuals who choose to stay at home and take over the operation of the family farm business or the community business or service. For families that have been successful, this may provide a very affluent life for some of the children and usually the other children are encouraged to attend school or are given help to get set up in farming or ranching. But what happens to the less fortunate persons—those without the successful family farm or the successful family business, or the encouragement to achieve? Many things happen, and this paper does not attempt to cover all the possibilities, but attempts to make the reader aware of the trends that are taking place.

Many families seek to escape rural poverty by moving into the urbanized areas and seeking non-farm “high paying” employment. Lacking skills and/or educational levels needed to secure “city” positions, the family finds itself still unable to escape from poverty. According to a recent article published by the State Department of Welfare, studies showed that persons entering at the lowest income levels have the greatest difficulty in rising to better jobs and higher income.

Why children from low-income families drop out of school at an early age could be attributed to several factors. Some of the factors that could lead to dropping out of school include: housing, food, health and family motivation. There is no real way to determine the influence that housing plays on the individual, yet many people believe that poor housing contributes to the attitudes of the child. Also an inadequate diet could make one tired and less alert than would be the case of the children with adequate diets. Added to this is the health situation which is often attributed to poor food and housing conditions. Studies conducted by educators show that children from low-income families score substantially lower on standardized tests and that their level of performance tends to drop as they grow older. Those who do manage to complete their first 12 years of school may not attend college for several reasons—financial, lack of motivation by family, lack of awareness, personal indifference, or other reasons.

There are those who believe that the poor in South Dakota could escape from poverty if they were not so lazy and were willing to work. However, census statistics show that two-thirds (80,000) of the poor persons in South Dakota are living in families headed by a male and more than half of these males worked full time during 1969. They were considered poor and living in poverty conditions because their earnings were too low to provide for their families.

As an example, consider a family of four living in South Dakota. Assume that the man is employed 40 hours per week and receives the minimum wage of $1.60 per hour. This family’s annual earnings are $3328, which is $972 below the poverty level of $4300 as established by the Social Security Administration. Even if the man were employed at $2.00 per hour, his annual salary would be $140 below the poverty level.1

The above example is probably the reason for the following remark “It is wrong to equate being poor with stupidity, laziness or lack of skill...the sin may well be the employer’s failure to pay a decent living wage.” That remark is usually the answer to “Most people on welfare could earn a living if they were not so lazy and were willing to work.”

The Concept of Poverty

One could equate the condition of poverty with that of weeds in the front yard. Both are very well rooted and will need special attention to be eliminated. Like seeds of the weed, the conditions of poverty are self perpetuating and will continue if unchecked.

1The South Dakota Employment Security Department published starting occupational wage rates for selected occupations on computer file June 30, 1973. The starting wages considered ranged from a low of 87¢ per hour to a high of $3.37 per hour. Twenty six percent of the occupations listed fell below the $2.00 per hour wage rate.
The individual grows up with rooted cultural and social patterns and through his parents becomes even more stricken. Added to this is the lack of education, housing, clothing, food and transportation needed for cultural development with church, school and local government and the condition goes unchecked.

At best, an individual who is a member of a low-income family will leave the rural poverty area in his most productive years in search of that "pie in the sky." When he does this, he doesn't benefit because of his past experiences. Also those he leaves behind have a poorer chance of escaping from poverty than they had before. First, because those left behind are predominately the aged and the very young, and secondly, because the smaller population is spread so sparsely that they cannot support or build strong flexible communities that offer the social and economic necessities to help them escape from poverty. In many rural areas the local governments, schools, churches, and other local services and facilities are continuing to decline.

You may wonder if money alone will solve the problem. It would take about $14 billion annually to lift the income of all people to the poverty level. This figures out to be about $1200 per "poor" household. Of this $14 billion, about $38 million would be needed in South Dakota to raise the income of the poor to the level of poverty. But even if the money were allotted in this way, whether it be by grants, or through pay increases provided by the government as supplements through the employer, it would not necessarily relieve poverty. Many of the poor would remain dependent, lacking self-esteem, never really able to gain the respect of their neighbors and really able to break away and make it on their own.

2The census summary for the United States shows 5,482,886 families below the poverty level with a mean income deficit of $1,546. In addition, there are 5,953,410 unrelated individuals below the poverty level with a mean income deficit of $953. The income deficit is the amount necessary to bring the family or individual up to the poverty level.

3In South Dakota 23,943 families are below the poverty level with a mean income deficit of $1,446 and 24,684 unrelated individuals live in South Dakota with a mean income deficit of $888. The mean income deficit for the 2,839 Indian families living in South Dakota is $2,075.

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