

# Poverty's power voice

*The Nation's Greg Kaufmann dispels the myths about poverty in America and the politics behind it*

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According to the last census, there were 46 million Americans living in poverty — more than the entire population of California. But despite the large mass of people struggling to get by, they hold little political clout. Instead, these millions are often ignored or openly derided by politicians, who eagerly slash poverty-support programs. And in the national press, the impoverished are frequently

either given a cursory glance or treated with outright derision.

One exception is Greg Kaufmann, who writes the "This Week in Poverty" blog for The Nation magazine. Kaufmann, a former speechwriter for Democratic campaigns, uses the blog to examine



Greg Kaufmann

under-covered policies and politics that affect the most economically vulnerable Americans. He also uses the platform to give a voice to people who would otherwise be completely left out of the national conversation.

"I don't consider myself an expert on any of these things," said Kaufmann. "I talk to the experts, and I talk to people who live in poverty. When you talk about the myths, one of the biggest myths is that people in poverty can't speak for themselves. If you take the time to talk to people about the issues, they understand them and know what we need to to."

**Jake Thomas:** *We have so many people struggling economically. Why do you think we don't see more elected officials making an issue of this? Why is poverty not a mainstream issue?*

**Greg Kaufmann:** It's a question of who votes, and it seems that people in poverty don't vote in large numbers. I think that there's a history in this country of bashing people in poverty and blaming them for their problems. So politicians are afraid of being sympathetic or empathetic — that they are going to lose by doing this. There's this idea that middle-class Americans who do vote are not receptive to that message, and I think that's a mistake. More middle-class people and formerly middle-class people can see that we all have a lot of the same issues in common, especially when it comes to access to the basics like food, housing, health care, education, jobs with good wages. I think we can do a lot more speaking to lower-income and middle-class people.

**J.T.:** *Covering issues of poverty, what do you think is the most under-covered issue?*

**G.K.:** I think you hardly see anything about people with disabilities in poverty. I'm not a numbers guy, I don't have a lot of statistics. I mean the figures for people with disabilities living in poverty are pretty

astounding. And what's even more concerning, I think, and you saw this with the NPR report on this, is treating people with disabilities is the new welfare queen; they're the new people to bash. So there's this long series on NPR suggesting that people are just taking advantage of disability assistance and that got so much play in the news. We could go into why that report was so flawed and really downright misleading, but it's a real problem. We seem to be going in a direction when there is coverage questioning people who need assistance.

**J.T.:** *Tell me more about that. What flaws did you see in the NPR report?*

**G.K.:** Well, for one their whole thesis was, oh my god, look at this spike in people receiving disability insurance. And if you look at what the actuaries in the Social Security Administration predicted in the mid-90s, this is exactly where they said we would be — because of the baby boomers aging and reaching an age where they have more disabilities and more women having entered the work force and paying into the disability insurance system.

Seriously, they said that we would get to this point like a year sooner than we did. We knew this spike was coming, but the report implied that the rise is due to people manipulating the system or because it's harder to get TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), so people are turning to the disability system. They even have a graph on their website showing the rise in disability recipients, and the fall in TANF recipients, as if they are linked. But the people who aren't receiving TANF are mostly single mothers with children. Those aren't the people getting disability — the typical recipient is a woman in her late 50s. They're comparing apples to oranges.

They also implied that the standard to get disability is low, and they looked at Hale County, Alabama, and they said, look at all the people getting disability. But in the rules it says the SSA can consider the number of jobs the claimant can do that exist in the region and the national economy — along with your age, education, and impairments — in determining whether you qualify for assistance.

So, in a lot of former mining or forestry areas, for example, your body's been worn down from decades of physical labor, you don't have skills beyond the ones you've needed to do your job your whole life, you have limited education—you can't just up and transfer to some job just like that. That's why you see outliers like Hale County where more people are on disability.

They took all these things we knew and twisted them, and they didn't talk to anybody who had a more, I would argue, deeper understanding of the system.

**J.T.:** *How do you think Barack Obama will be remembered on poverty? What do you think his legacy will be on that?*

**G.K.:** I wouldn't say it's a complicated



By Ed Gould

answer; I'd say it's almost a schizophrenic answer. If you look at the Recovery Act (the stimulus), it did great things for helping homeless people and helping people who would have otherwise been homeless, with people getting access to food stamps, subsidized jobs.

There's a lot of things in the Recovery Act where, in retrospect, you say, I can't believe that happened. You can't get anything nowadays. Since then, he rarely talks about poverty, and I think that's important because it enforces why people don't talk about poverty. If the president were leading on that it would help change the conversation. He said some good things in the inauguration and in his first State of the Union, where he wanted to raise the minimum wage and pathways to the middle class. But he doesn't use the phrases poor people, people in poverty, but people who aspire to the middle class. The semantics are less important than the policy.

Other than that, he seems to be really focused on pre-kindergarten expansion and child care and Head Start and early childhood education. If he can get that through, that will do a lot for the way people view what he did or did not do for low-income people. But you know, to my mind, his focus and willingness to discuss issues related to people in poverty has been very wanting, and his legacy, right now, with the exception of the Recovery Act, and that's an important exception. It's a lot of missed opportunities.

**J.T.:** *You write a lot about TANF, which was created by the Clinton welfare reform in the 1990s. What do you think the legacy of the Clinton welfare reform has been?*

**G.K.:** Well, on the one hand, the positives have been the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, but what everyone really associates with welfare reform is TANF and the work requirement and the time limit.

So, it's great in terms of the Earned Income Tax Credit, but TANF, and the biggest part of the policy, is a disaster. We have 50 different welfare systems because the states can basically do what they want. So in some states like Wyoming, almost no one gets assistance. It varies wildly. There is no thought to the individual what barriers they might have to work. They push them into low-wage jobs or training for jobs. Most states don't allow for a path to create going to school or doing course work that's going

to earn you a living-wage job. So really, it's a disaster. The Recovery Act added money through TANF that states could use to have subsidized jobs. It would be great to bring that back, but state by state, the time limit varies. State by state, who gets it varies. Is that what we're saying: that we can't set a national minimum bar of what we expect to do for people who are struggling? I have nothing really positive to say about TANF.

**J.T.:** *Barack Obama called for a raise in the minimum wage. But how much would that really help? Even if you raised it to \$9 or \$10 an hour, it's still hard to get by on that.*

**G.K.:** From what I'm seeing, you're right. There are a lot of people who say it needs to be \$15. Senator Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., said it needs to be something like \$20. I don't know what the hourly wage is you need to do this, but my thought was that the minimum wage was enough to raise a family out of poverty in the 60s and 70s, and that's what it still should be doing. It's not enough, and we need other work supports to really make a difference, like access to child care, access to affordable housing. So, I agree with you that more needs to be done. We might need to start higher and negotiate down. It was good that he said it, but you know, setting a higher wage floor is important, but much more needs to be done.

**J.T.:** *You had a post on your blog about a study put out by Alabama Sen. Jeff Sessions claiming that the federal government spends more on poor families than many middle-income families make in a year. What are some of the biggest myths out there about people living in poverty?*

**G.K.:** That people in poverty don't work. That's one of the biggest ones. That people in poverty are drug addicts. You have these drug-testing laws. Florida sought to drug test unemployment recipients, but studies show that there is no greater incident of drug use for people who are unemployed and receiving benefits than other people. So courts found that it amounted to an illegal search and seizure. There's the welfare dependence myth that people live comfortably on welfare. People have no idea what the real benefit level is.