

OPINION

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Booting Poor People from Food Assistance

A misguided ideological campaign

BY ISAIAH J. POOLE

With the winter winds of January came a flurry of reports that several states were moving to cut thousands of people from their Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, or “food stamp”) rolls.

In New Jersey, for example, Gov. Chris Christie pulled the plug on benefits to 11,000 unemployed state residents.

By this spring, an estimated 500,000 people nationwide could be cut off. For most of them, the maximum benefit of less than \$200 a month is all the federal aid they get. For some, it’s their entire income.

These people live in states that have chosen to reinstate work requirements on able-bodied adults without children, which had been suspended since the 2008 economic downturn. It means that single adults who aren’t working at least 20 hours a week or participating in a job-training program may only get three months of nutrition assistance in a three-year period. After that, they’re on their own.

Some people call this a successful example of welfare

reform at work. But to experts like Joe Soss, a University of Minnesota professor who studies the drive to “end welfare as we know it” that started in the 1990s under President Bill Clinton, it’s the latest chapter in a misguided ideological campaign.

This drive is a consequence, he told me, of

longstanding prejudices,” Soss explained. These “get-tough policies are cast as benefiting the poor in the long run,” he added, while their hardline supporters claim to shield taxpayers from “criminal thugs, undocumented immigrants, and those who live off the welfare system.”

His 2011 book, *Disciplining the Poor*, chronicles the rise

states have generally been at the forefront of efforts to restrict social supports — from cash aid to nutrition, housing, and health care — and to use poor people’s behaviors as a litmus test for government help.”

That approach was evident earlier this year, when six of the Republican presidential candidates attended an

out is less bleeding-heart than cold-blooded.

Under Christie’s leadership, New Jersey has sharply reduced the share of federal block grant money it spends on direct cash assistance to needy families, according to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. But as the number of people getting help has fallen, the percentage of the state’s residents living in poverty actually went up — from 9 percent to 11 percent — between 2009 and 2012.

Now, community servants worry that more stringent work rules for food assistance are being imposed when there isn’t enough job and education assistance for people who need it. “I don’t know where these work programs are. And I know we are not ready for this,” Diane Riley of the Community FoodBank of New Jersey told NJ.com.

It’s a story that’s being repeated across the country. The trend is also fueling a debate — not over whether people should be working instead of receiving welfare, but whether we get there by investing more in education, training, and job creation, or by slashing budgets, shaming the poor, and turning our backs.

Isaiah J. Poole is the online communications director at Campaign for America’s Future.

Efforts to get tough with the poor have often been a bipartisan affair. But Republican-controlled states have generally been at the forefront of efforts to restrict social supports — from cash aid to nutrition, housing, and health care — and to use poor people’s behaviors as a litmus test for government help.

--University of Minnesota professor Joe Soss

political rhetoric suggesting that low-income people are poor because of their inability to exercise self-discipline and make good choices.

“It’s a modern update of

of what Soss calls “poverty governance” over the past 40 years. “Efforts to get tough with the poor have often been a bipartisan affair,” Soss said.

“But Republican-controlled

antipoverty forum in South Carolina inspired by the late “bleeding-heart conservative” politician Jack Kemp. Christie took part. But the way his policies have played

Protesting US Policies with Guns Doesn’t Work

A failure to learn about nonviolence

BY TOM H. HASTINGS

Video footage of the Oregon State Police shooting of armed occupier LaVoy Finicum following a vehicular chase is so very sad to watch. Finicum may have been quite stupid in his belief that American public lands should belong to private ranchers, but he did not deserve to die. Sadly, he ar-

ranged for his own death.

Finicum, the spokesperson for the armed militia which took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge on Jan. 2 was quite open—he carried a gun at all times and was ready to use it. He reached for it, apparently, and was shot dead. Geez.

Like Finicum, I’ve opposed US policy enough to risk arrest, to occupy federal facilities, and to stand up to federal law enforcement. Unlike him, I’ve actually done it numerous times and never been shot. I’ve always been

nonviolent and, to be frank, my method makes victory possible and, in some cases, achieved. Finicum apparently thought that a gun makes you safer. It is the opposite.

I helped occupy Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden’s office twice — once when he was thinking about how he might vote on the 2002 Senate bill to grant George W. Bush essentially unlimited powers to invade and wage war on Iraq or anyone else. Wyden ended up voting our way. We were nonviolent and courteous.

I helped occupy his office again in 2006 to convince him

to speak out against the war in Iraq. We were quite friendly, actually, with Homeland Security, who arrested us. Wyden did as we asked—he posted on his website (finally!) that he opposed the ongoing war and he even rose on the United States of America Senate floor to call for an end to that occupation. As usual, we carried no guns and in fact met with the staff ahead of time to explain nonviolence.

I’ve done other nonviolent occupations over the decades—even a one-man occupation of the Soviet embassy in nonviolent resistance

to their weaponry. I’ve never even had a weapon pulled on me, let alone being shot, and every single public policy ask I’ve made has ultimately been granted.

It is so sad to see Muslim extremists reverting to 12th century brutality and American “patriots” regressing to 19th century behavior. LaVoy Finicum didn’t have to die; he needed to learn about nonviolence.

Tom H. Hastings is core faculty in the Conflict Resolution Department at Portland State University and is founding director of PeaceVoice.