

**Framing the social safety net**

One of the goals of the Southeast Working-Class Task Force is to ease and eradicate poverty in the Southeast. As we work with Mayor Hogsett's Working Group on Education and Poverty, we gather local various concepts. [www.indystar.com/story/opinion/columnists/suzette-hackney/2017/05/26/hackney-mayor-mission-eradicate-poverty/345535001/](http://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/columnists/suzette-hackney/2017/05/26/hackney-mayor-mission-eradicate-poverty/345535001/) Here are some ideas from Sheila Suess Kennedy, a professor of law and public policy at the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at IUPUI. She writes opinions for the *Indiana Business Journal*.

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The Trump administration's proposed budget cuts reflect long-standing political debates about the purpose of the social safety net—and not so incidentally, the morality of taxation.

Attitudes about social welfare can be divided into two utterly incompatible categories: The use of citizens' tax monies to provide a safety net is viewed either as charity or as self-interest, properly understood.

Those who view social programs as charity may support or oppose these programs. Supporters tend to take a *noblesse oblige* approach to welfare; they have been fortunate, and thus have a moral or religious duty to help those who have not been so fortunate. Opponents are less empathetic; they tend to view poverty as evidence of moral failure and the use of their tax dollars to ameliorate poverty as akin to theft—taking from the industrious to assist the unproductive.

Copious data rebuts this moralized view of poverty and the notion that able-bodied people are living it up on the backs of taxpayers. (Most recipients are children, the elderly and the disabled.) Most poor people work 40 or more hours a week for wages too low to sustain them, and at least in Indiana, very few qualify for any sort of government assistance.

When social welfare programs are categorized as charity, there is a natural impulse to focus on who deserves to be helped, so government agencies have expensive bureaucracies administering means tests to avoid inadvertently assisting someone who might not “deserve” help.

There is a better way to think about social welfare. As many European and Scandinavian countries have discovered, ensuring an income “floor” and universal access to medical care benefits everyone in a society—and not always in ways that are obvious.

Several years ago, I looked into research addressing the difference between gun violence in Canada and the United States. Our populations and cultures are similar, we watch the same television shows and movies, and Canada has widespread gun ownership. Yet U.S. gun violence is much higher. Researchers suggest that lower levels of economic insecurity in Canada, thanks to a more robust social safety net, account for much of the difference.

Sociologists have studied the effects of income equality and, after controlling for cultural variables, they've found significant evidence that both physical and social health are better in societies where income is more equally distributed. A recent review of the sociological literature confirms that a number of social problems—including mental illness, violence, imprisonment, lack of trust, teenage and out-of-wedlock births, obesity, drug abuse and poor educational performance of schoolchildren—are more common in more unequal societies.

I frequently think about a conversation I had with a wealthy friend some years ago. We were discussing taxes, and he made the point that he preferred higher taxes to social unrest; he didn't want to live in a society where the rich had to barricade themselves in gated communities and worry about mobs in the streets. In his view, tax dollars used to buy social peace were a bargain.

A true social safety net is not limited to the (grudging and inadequate) financial assistance given to the most disadvantaged in a society. A true safety net is a culture that values all its members and a government that sees itself accountable to all constituents, not simply the privileged.

Defining the social safety net that way allows us to see that the portion of our taxes used to assist needy fellow-citizens isn't “forced charity.” It's our membership dues. •

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