

Safety net successes

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Sen. Marco Rubio. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Gage Skidmore](#)

The War on Poverty declared 50 years ago by President Lyndon Johnson has often been criticized as a case of government overreach. Yet many of the programs that Johnson kick-started have significantly improved the lives of millions of Americans.

Adjusting for inflation, researchers at Columbia University concluded that between 1967 and 2012 the overall poverty rate fell from 26 percent to 16 percent. A major beneficiary of the War on Poverty has been the elderly population. In 1960, about 35 percent of older Americans were poor, whereas in 2012 only 9 percent were. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, over the past 50 years childhood malnutrition has almost vanished, the average income of the lowest fifth of Americans has risen, and infant mortality has dropped significantly.

These advances are attributable to specific programs that began or grew out of the antipoverty efforts of the 1960s. These programs include:

- the Medicare program for seniors, which (with Social Security) has kept millions of older Americans healthy and out of poverty;
- food stamps (now called the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program), which have given families living on little income the ability to stretch their food budgets;

- the Medicaid program, which has proved to be a cost-effective way of providing health insurance for low-income Americans and people with disabilities; and
- the Earned Income Tax Credit, which permits low-income workers to keep more of their pay, shifting the tax burden toward higher earners.

Maintaining and enhancing this kind of safety net has required constant political and social vigilance. Now it appears that Republicans, known recently for wanting only to cut safety net programs, are interested in offering antipoverty ideas of their own.

For example, Senator Marco Rubio (R., Fla.), pointing to the alleged failures of the War on Poverty, called for replacing the EITC with wage supplements. Rubio says that a federal wage supplement program “would allow an unemployed individual to take a job that pays, say, \$18,000 a year—which on its own is not enough to make ends meet—but then receive a federal enhancement to make the job a more enticing alternative to collecting unemployment insurance.”

While Rubio offered little by way of details, in theory a wage supplement might offer some advantages. It would help people with a monthly check instead of an end-of-year tax return. And while the EITC favors families with children, a simple supplement could apply equally to the childless. Of course, this issue could also be addressed by revising the EITC itself. Some people criticize the EITC for helping single parents more than married ones—but child poverty exists disproportionately in single-parent households.

A wage supplement—unlike a higher minimum wage—would do nothing to press corporations to pay a living wage. But at least Rubio has acknowledged that \$18,000 a year is not enough to support a family and that government can and should do something to address the problem. He has offered an antipoverty strategy worth discussing. With the 50 million Americans in poverty—20 percent of whom are children—we say: welcome to the conversation.