

A Bipartisan Plan for Fighting Poverty

Spotlight Exclusive Interview with Lawrence Mead of New York University and Ronald Mincy of Columbia University

Seeking to find consensus solutions for poverty issues that could break the partisan gridlock, the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution assembled a group of scholars from across the ideological spectrum to develop a [bipartisan report](#). “Opportunity, Responsibility and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream,” has been warmly received by both parties and was cited by [New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof](#) as one of several promising signs for legislative compromise.

Lawrence Mead and Ronald Mincy are two of the authors of the report, which will be discussed in an event on Feb. 4 that is being co-sponsored by Spotlight and the Ford Foundation. Click [here](#) to register.

How did this diverse group come together to develop this plan? What was the motivation for doing so?

LM: Jonathan Haidt, a moral psychologist at NYU, conceived of this project out of concern for the political polarization frustrating efforts to deal with these issues. Haidt then helped convene a group of well-known experts generally comprising moderates from both parties. While agreement was never total, we did finally reach a shared endorsement of the report that was both constructive and actionable.

RM: During the Clinton administration, a similar tactic of bipartisan consensus was used to address welfare reform. The issues surrounding poverty have since broadened to include both reducing inequality and expanding opportunity. This project is a disciple of that strategy, and will hopefully help to move the next administration on these issues, as well as state and local governments.

Can you talk about the principles of “opportunity, responsibly, and security” that guided this work?

LM: Public opinion shows overwhelmingly that individuals favor government support for the poor in tandem with an expectation of self-help, which in my experience is the best approach. The overarching theory of the report is that we are not fully addressing the problem unless we are addressing all three of these ideas.

In order to guide the recommendations, the report lays out a set of facts about poverty that you hope conservatives and liberals can agree on. Can you walk us through some of these ideas?

LM: There was a strong consensus on basic points. First, if you look at the [Supplemental Poverty Measure](#), you see that the government has had success in reducing poverty over the last 50 years. And society is getting richer in the overall sense.

So in some ways, the poverty rate is not the principle concern. Other issues, like rising inequality, are increasingly important, and tied to factors like a decline in work and unplanned pregnancy. There is agreement that these are drivers of poverty and inequality, but the ultimate causes are more unclear.

RM: There has been very little movement on average hourly earnings for men lacking a college degree. There was a large decline in wages after the Great Recession, but this has been a troubling trend dating back several decades.

The other thing is the step decline in two parent families (with African American children especially likely to grow up in single parent households). We are not going to see meaningful reductions in poverty or increases in opportunity unless more children have the benefit of both parents.

What are some of the major recommendations the report advocates for?

RM: First, there is a great deal of emphasis on supporting the American family. Children need two committed parents to gain full access to the opportunities this society affords. There are large disparities in opportunity available to children in single-parent and two-parent households.

Another of our recommendations focuses on increasing employment and training for men without a college education, and expanding access to the Earned Income Tax Credit. Expanding male earnings was a major area of consensus.

LM: Increasing employment through proper work testing for individuals on benefits was another key recommendation. Many existing programs benefit people who could work more than they do. But we were cautious about specific recommendations. We don't want to make it impossible for people to get benefits, or to cause these programs to collapse. Again, we balanced values. We want to reduce over-dependency, and thus promote responsibility, while also not "pulling the rug out" from under people who truly depend on these programs.

Another issue is ensuring job availability. There are more debates about why adults are jobless than anything else in poverty studies. Knowing why people aren't working would reveal a great deal about the nature of poverty and how to better combat it.

Next is education. While K-12 education is heavily funded, early childhood and postsecondary education are not. The report advocates increasing funding for them. There are many related issues to consider that complicate this, like the efficacy of programs like Head Start and universal Pre-K. There is, however, evidence that these type of programs can be impactful if done correctly.

With post-secondary education, the main emphasis is on developing alternatives to regular college by making community college more effective and reforming the vocational training sector.

Bringing together people of different viewpoints has to create challenges. Were there particular issues where it was difficult to reach any kind of consensus?

RM: Certainly the question of marriage was contentious. Conservatives in our group wanted to singularly throw support behind marriage as a remedy for boosting single parent households, while the liberals were hesitant on going that far.

We reached consensus on advocating that parents should have children when they are in a committed relationship and are capable of providing a stable environment.

LM: Also, we had some difficulty on the minimum wage. The liberals wanted a larger increase, conservatives a smaller one. We settled on some increase, but below the \$10.10 mark advocated for by President Obama.

Is it easier to get academics to talk about these issues than politicians? How optimistic are you about the prospect of bipartisan political action around some of the ideas you lay out?

RM: We came to this group not just as ourselves, but as representatives of various constituents and interests. We were aware of these responsibilities, and so compromise could be difficult. We all lost something at the table. But we wanted to set an example for people about the importance of compromise and how collaboration is possible.

It sounds like you're both very proud of this plan and the work that went into it.

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LM: Yes, we achieved two important goals. First, getting agreement beyond the paralyzing polarization. And second, creating compelling, consensus policy proposals.

I was impressed by this and somewhat surprised that liberals came around on issues of work testing and marriage, while conservatives were able to compromise on increased benefits and spending on the poor. There really was a conversation based heavily on research. The thinking on this is quite sophisticated.

RM: One thing I always say to my students is that you cannot dismiss opposing viewpoints. If you are going to be an effective policymaker, you have to understand the other side's reasoning. It will ultimately help you do your job better. It has helped me immensely to learn why conservatives hold some of the views they do. This exchange through this project was invaluable, and I hope those who don't necessarily agree with some of our recommendations will still engage with them critically.

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