

# Poverty — costlly, forgotten and worse than ever

In July 2007, candidate Barack Obama stood in a poor Washington neighborhood and quoted Bobby Kennedy on poverty in America.

"How can a country like this allow it?" Kennedy asked in the Mississippi Delta that day in 1967. Obama echoed the question in Anacostia four decades later.

"We can't afford to lose a generation of tomorrow's doctors and scientists and teachers to poverty," Obama said. "We can make excuses for it or we can fight about it or we can ignore poverty altogether, but as long as it's here it will always be a betrayal of the ideals we hold as Americans. It's not who we are."

Some War on Poverty programs were ineffective, Obama conceded, but it was wrong to conclude there was no role for the federal government in fighting poverty. The government can make a difference with programs like school lunch and pre-natal care, he said.

And there was stick with the carrot. "It makes a difference when a father realizes that responsibility does not end at conception; when he understands that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child but the courage to raise one," Obama said. "It makes a difference when a parent turns off the TV once in awhile, puts away the video games and starts reading to their child, and getting involved in their education."

People love mild scolding, especially if it's directed at someone else. Last time around, people loved the candidate Obama who they thought would bridge the gaps between Democrats and Republicans.

Five-plus years after Obama's Anacostia speech, both President Obama and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney have largely ignored poverty in their presidential campaigns. We hear a lot about the 1 percent, the 47 percent and even, lately, the 100 percent. But the 15 percent who live in poverty? Almost never.

Romney mentioned the rise in poverty under Obama's watch in the last debate but offered no specific plan for tackling poverty. Obama was silent on the subject.

Even if people were begging the White House and Congress to do more for the poor — they are not — Washington knows only how to turn the spigot on and off. But spending alone, like words, won't end poverty.

Wouldn't it be great if someone could come up with a few rules young people could follow to nearly guarantee a life free of poverty?

Trick question. Yes, it would be great, and, yes, the rules do exist.

Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution studied poverty and Census data and came up with three rules to avoid poverty. Here they are:

- \* One, finish high school.
- \* Two, work full time.
- \* Three, wait until age 21 and get married — before having a baby.

That's it. People who follow all three rules had only a 2 percent chance of being poor, Haskins told the Senate Finance Committee in June. But those who violate all three rules have a 77 percent chance of being poor.

People often think getting a job is the key to success, but in America, it's very possible to work full time and still be poor. A single mother of two on her own who works full-time all year at the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, takes no vacations and no time off for sick days to take care of sick kids, would earn \$15,000 — about \$2,500 below the poverty level for a mom with two kids, Haskins told the committee.

Our leaders need to do more to make it cool to stay in school, to work full-time and to wait to start families. It won't be easy, but it would pay huge dividends.