US welfare spending up—but help for the neediest down

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Although the nation is spending more on welfare than ever before, most of that money is going to better-off families rather than the very poorest, a researcher found.

Robert A. Moffitt, the Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Economics at the Johns Hopkins University, found that the United States has become more generous over time in supporting low-income families, spending 74 percent more in inflation-adjusted dollars on welfare programs in 2007 than in 1975. But for the 2.5 million single parent families with the absolute lowest levels of earnings, aid dropped 35 percent between 1983 and 2004. During that same period, aid rose 74 percent for those earning slightly more.

"You would think that the government would offer the most support to those who have the lowest incomes and provide less help to those with higher incomes," Moffitt said. "But that is not the case."

Moffitt, who is president of the Population Association of America, presented his findings May 2 at the organization's annual meeting in a keynote address titled The Deserving Poor, the Family, and the U.S. Welfare System. The report is slated for winter 2015 publication in the journal *Demography*.

Moffitt researched the 15 largest social safety net programs over the past 30 years and found spending to assist the poor had dramatically increased, especially since the mid-1980s. He also examined who was

getting that money and discovered three major trends.

First, there was the marked shift away from those earning the least money, as little as 50 percent of the federal poverty line, to those with incomes as much as 200 percent above the poverty line. That means in 2014, a family of four earning $11,925 a year likely got less aid than a same-sized family earning $47,700.

Next, he found more assistance going to the elderly and the disabled and less to the non-aged and non-disabled.

And finally he tracked a spending shift to married parent families, away from single parent families.

Though welfare spending was up overall, Moffitt found the programs with the most growth tended to assist only specialized populations. These included the Supplemental Security Income program (which only helps people who are elderly, blind and disabled), the Earned Income Tax Credit program (which offers tax credits only to working people and mainly to families earning $10,000 to $20,000) and the Child Tax Credit (which only helps those with significant taxable income).

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program, or food stamps, which also expanded greatly, does help a broad range of recipients but provides only about $5 per day per person.

Overall, Moffitt discovered a distinct trend of welfare benefits going to those who are regarding as "deserving" of support. More directly put, the government and voters prefer that aid go to those who work, who are married and who have kids, Moffitt said.

Single parent families with no disabled members and all members younger than 62 received, when adjusted for inflation, 20 percent less

from the government in 2004 than in 1983. Of those families, those with incomes 50 percent below the poverty line took the biggest hit with an aid drop of 35 percent. Those with incomes above 50 percent of the poverty line actually saw an increase of 73 percent.

"We see a pattern—rising support for those who work and declining support for those who do not," Moffitt said. "The decline of support to families with non-employed members and to single parents seems to be rooted in the presumption that they have not taken personal responsibility for their own situation."

While Moffitt agreed that work should be rewarded and that those who are capable of working should be required to do so, he recommended that those who are making an effort but are not able to find good-paying jobs receive more support than they are currently receiving.

Earlier Moffitt research, published in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, showed how U.S. aid programs expanded to help Americans during the Great Recession. More on that report here.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University

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