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The War on Poverty, Coles County, and Addressing Local Conditions

The year 2014 marks the 50th Anniversary of the “War on Poverty”, the federal government’s attempt to, in the words of President Johnson at his January 8, 2014 State of the Union Address, “not only relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.” Johnson, like so many politicians, bureaucrats, activists, and members of the general population, was not interested in a system of handouts, but for means which the poor could use to lift themselves out of poverty. Poverty was a personal, individual issue, explaining why interventions sought to address individual ‘symptoms’.

The poverty rate across the country in 1964 was 19 percent, but the percentage of poor persons fell rapidly through next decade to near 10 percent where, until the Great Recession, it remained relatively low. New programs, such as food assistance, employment programs, and health care countered poverty’s symptoms and, arguably, prevented an epidemic. However, after many of these programs changed or disappeared through the 1980s up to the 2007 economic downturn, the percent of individuals officially poor increased. In 2012, 15 percent of individuals are poor, which includes 21.8 percent of children under 18 and 9.1 percent of persons 65 years and older.

Yet these are national figures and, as the War on Poverty correctly aspired, poverty and its related issues such as food insecurity, hunger, homelessness, unemployment, and health, are local, and best understood and addressed within local conditions. This was the point of Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity, command central for coordinating and funding local action agencies at the front-lines of the battle.

The national poverty figures have not changed in the previous two years, but the situation here in Coles County could not be more different. The US Census Bureau’s most current Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), the most efficient annual measurements of poverty for places such as Coles County, Illinois, which have a population lower than 50,000, shows 11,309 persons, 22.9 percent of all individuals are poor. Compared to Illinois (14.7%) and the U.S. as a whole (15.9%), Coles County’s poverty level dwarfs the state and country.

Further the percent of poor Coles County children less than 18 years of age stands at 25.5 percent, and 24.9 percent of school-aged children 5-17 years old are poor. Again, these figures are higher than the estimates for the state and the country showing the reality of poverty—especially childhood poverty—here in Coles County.

The most recent Census Bureau 5-year rolling estimates mirror these single-year trends: on average, the percent of poor individuals in Coles County from 2008 through 2012 is 22.0 percent, compared with 13.7 percent for Illinois and 14.9 percent for the country. Our county’s elevated 5-year average poverty rates of 12.1 percent for families and 24.4 percent for children also outpace state- and federal-level averages, but the percent of poor elderly persons 65 years and older of 6.7 percent is lower than Illinois (8.6 percent) and the country (9.4 percent).

Underlying these data is one revealing disparity in the economic conditions here in Coles County. The annual average unemployment rate in the county matches the country and the state over time, and, for 2012, is the same as Illinois (8.9 percent) and slightly higher than the United States (8.1 percent). However, having a job does not translate to a living wage; comparing median family incomes shows Coles County at \$56,988, nearly fourteen thousand dollars less than \$70,144 for Illinois and over seven thousand dollars lower than \$64,585 for the United States. For households, these disparities remain: the median household income in Coles County, \$38,088, is over eighteen-thousand dollars lower than Illinois (\$56,853) and nearly fifteen thousand lower than the country (\$53,046).

Often, persons and commentators who malign poverty programs and poor individuals and families argue that a lack of personal responsibility and individual initiative breeds dependence and a culture of reliance and addiction on government handouts. The War on Poverty, fifty years ago, was built on these assumptions. However, comparing unemployment and median incomes challenges these myths. In Coles County, individuals and family breadwinners are working, but for significantly less money than peers in the state and around the country. Rather, in this context, only 55 percent of poor households in our county receive SNAP benefits, half of these households have at least one wage-earner and half have children.

In recent months, federal funding for these food and nutrition services, as well as long-term unemployment benefits, has been slashed. They sustain, on a daily basis, those in our community in need—employed or not—but are now offering only insecurities. This is why programs and services—food pantries and kitchens, as well as shelters, re-sale shops, health and nutrition services, schools and school-based relief, and veterans and senior services, to name but a few—are of immediate and vital importance to our community. These programs, already stretched thin, do not offer handouts but services to relieve the impacts of poverty and aid in preserving the dignity of our most needy community members.

Self-sufficiency through employment is important, but having a job that pays a wage with which a household can adequately be maintained is another; employment is visible in Coles County, but the ability to support a family is still lacking. Where some commentators, both locally and nationally, write that the “war on poverty” has failed, perhaps it is high time to establish a new front in this battle, and do so locally in Coles County. This battle should focus on systemic and contextual change, rather than misguided individual diagnoses. To paraphrase President Johnson, we should fight to “not only relieve the social conditions sustaining poverty, but to change them and, above all, to prevent them.”