

The poor are better off without welfare. Ask Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback.

It is not the good intentions of government programs that matter, it is the bad incentives.

In J.D. Vance's hit 2016 autobiography [Hillbilly Elegy](#), he tells the vivid story of rural Midwestern whites trapped in a cycle of poverty and unemployment. Preeminent among the colorful characters who populated Vance's life as a young man was his grandmother, "Meemaw," a strong, salty old woman who did not possess a filter between her thoughts and words.

Meemaw believed much of the poverty in her Middletown, Ohio neighborhood was caused by government handouts that incentivized the poor to not work. Among the invectives she lobbed at her neighbors: "She's a lazy whore, but she wouldn't be if she was forced to get a job"; "I hate those f_____ (the government) for giving these people the money to move into our neighborhood"; "I can't understand why people who've worked all their lives scrape by while these deadbeats buy liquor and cell phone coverage with our tax money."

While intemperate in her observations, new data show that, at least relating to her larger point, Meemaw might have been on to something.

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A recent study by the conservative-leaning [Foundation for Government Accountability](#) tracked more than 6,000 Kansas families — 17,000 individuals — who were moved off of cash assistance in 2011 when Governor

Sam Brownback instituted new work requirements for welfare recipients. The data show that families who left government assistance under the new work requirements saw their incomes double within one year of leaving welfare. Within four years, their incomes nearly tripled, as they earned nearly \$48 million more in wages than when they received a government check.

The jobs those Kansans obtained were spread throughout 600 different industries, from health care to information technology to food service to retail. Thanks to these new jobs, the number of able-bodied adults on the welfare rolls has dropped by 78% since Brownback's reforms took effect.

Granted, this is just one study (National Review's Robert VerBruggen has offered some helpful qualifications, including the fact that the report [doesn't include a control group](#) to measure progress), but it does undercut the idea that cutting cash assistance would leave people helpless and destitute.

In fact, the study highlights a central tenet of modern conservatism, which is to take a given policy proposal and ask the important question, "and then what?"

Typically, progressives will make bold pronouncements about what will happen if any particular policy item is advanced, whether positive or negative. They complain that taking welfare from people will leave poor people in poverty, or repealing Obamacare will leave [22 million sick people](#) without insurance. Liberals breathlessly advocate raising taxes on "the rich" and cranking the minimum wage up to \$15 an hour.

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And then what?

As the Kansas study shows, people have the capacity to respond to incentives rather than have their behavior controlled by directives. Those affected by

changes didn't remain static; they adapted to work requirements and sought jobs rather than allowing their families to starve.

Similarly, of the oft-referenced "22 million" people that would "lose" health insurance if Obamacare were repealed, 73% would simply not be [forced to purchase insurance](#) they don't want or can't afford anymore. If they decided they like the plan they had under the Affordable Care Act, they could keep paying for it as they did while the bill was in effect. They would, once again, adapt.

Of course, "human behavior is complicated" doesn't make for an effective slogan in a Democratic primary. Rarely will you see a lefty politician advocate for a \$15 minimum wage while also acknowledging it will cost low-wage workers their jobs, or push for more environmental regulations while admitting those regulations might drive American jobs overseas.

Progressivism is all about calling the shot with little regard for the ricochet that follows.

In the era of 140-character political arguments, this puts conservatism at a distinct disadvantage. On Twitter, running through a list of a policy's various unintended consequences is no match for a well-timed Game of Thrones GIF.

Yet hopefully examples such as the one in Kansas demonstrate the silliness of overblown pronouncements about conservatives' true goals. Liberal rhetoric is essentially the public policy Table of Contents; in order to understand why conservatives put so much trust in the judgement of individuals, you'll have to read the whole book.

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