Orphanages Aren’t Welfare Reform

By Douglas J. Besharov

Even if all the children living with their extended families were able to stay home, that would leave 1.25 million subject to placement in orphanages, an enormously expensive proposition. The average family on welfare—a mother with two children—receives benefits of about $15,000 a year in cash, food stamps, Medicaid, housing, and other services. At a minimum, one year in an orphanage costs $30,000 per child; some orphanages cost twice that. Thus the cost of such care for the children of an average welfare family would be at least $72,000 a year.

Within two decades, the total cost would rise to at least $70 billion a year in today’s dollars. Surely a Republican Congress would recoil at spending so much to create a new government bureaucracy.

It is also doubtful that the nation’s child welfare system could absorb so many children. Agencies already have trouble caring for the 450,000 children now in their custody. Some youths are abused, neglected, or neglected while in care, and many are denied a nurturing and stable environment. Add over a million new “orphans,” and we’ll have a new social crisis. And what about race? About 40 percent of all out-of-wedlock births are African-American, and black women make up a disproportionate share of long-term welfare dependents. In Chicago, 83 percent of black women giving birth for the first time are unmarried. A tough policy that falls heavily on a minority community should give us pause.

Of course, all of this presupposes that the G.O.P. intends to carry out the talk of orphanages with strong legislation. But Newt Gingrich and his colleagues may already balked. The only specific welfare cutoff they have proposed—that in the “Contract With America”—is limited to unwed mothers under 18, which would affect only about 628,000 children.

Moreover, according to the contract, if the teen-ager’s mother was already on welfare, as many are, the government would continue to subsidize the teen-ager through Aid to Families With Dependent Children until she is 18. The younger mother would be denied cash assistance for her baby but would continue to receive Medicaid and food stamps for her child. And if a teen-ager mother had another baby after she turned 18, she wouldn’t deny any benefits for the second child.

The real effect of these watered-down provisions would be to encourage unwed mothers to live with their families—a laudable goal. But then why reduce benefits to teen-ager mothers already living at home? And why promise new benefits for children born after a teen-ager mother reaches 18? This is a frightening incentive for more births.

If the plan contained in the contract is unlikely to drive many children into institutional care, why all the talk about orphanages? Perhaps because the Republicans want to signal toughness toward the underclass and a return to traditional values. But they are making a mistake in promoting a mirage, for it needlessly makes them seem cold hearted and undercut supports for their reform agenda.

Orphanages could easily become the welfare reform equivalent of midnight basketball in last year’s crime bill—a politically exploitable but otherwise minor provision in an enormously significant piece of legislation. The sooner all sides recognize that orphanages are not the issue, the sooner we can start on real welfare reform.

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