

It's time to find new definition of 'poor'

Shortly after my last column, The Gazette ran a series on the working poor in El Paso County. After reading all the articles, I was struck by two things:

- 1) For the people profiled, dating, getting married, having children and staying married was not a big part of the picture.
- 2) Everyone profiled was richer than almost everyone else on the planet.

Readers of this column know I have some serious bones to pick with social conservatives. I've written that drug prohibition is a mistake, the TV show "South Park" is hilarious and moral, any consensual act between adults deserves constitutional protection, and "intelligent design" doesn't belong in a science classroom.

But here's a message for my liberal friends: Just because social conservatives believe something doesn't make it wrong.

In fact, the strongest predictor of poverty is being born into a single-parent household. The best way out is to be born into a married couple with at least one working parent. It should be no surprise The Gazette's series on the working poor supports this conclusion.

I understand that life is not a fairy tale. There will always be circumstances where divorce is not only right but essential. I also understand that we live in a crippled market economy. Work can be hard to find, particularly for those on the lower rungs of the ladder.

But where are the advocates for the poor who care about how casually some sectors of society treat marriage and parenthood? Do any recognize that in the childhood rhyme "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in a baby carriage," the order is really important? Are any of them willing to take on the regulations and laws that make it harder for the least skilled to find work?

Still, I meant it when I said that everyone in the story was rich. They were poor compared to the average American. But the "average American" is not a reasonable standard. When it comes to wealth, America is not reasonable. We are an unreasonably, mind-bogglingly, stupefyingly rich country. That's what happens when a nation is found-



OPINION
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ed by the right people with the right ideas.

Living in a rich country means that even the working poor live, eat and sleep better than the overwhelming majority of all people who have ever lived. That includes those alive today.

Of those living below the poverty line in America, 46 percent own their own homes. Seventy-five percent have air conditioning (40 years ago, only a third of the country did). Three-quarters of the poor own a car, nearly a third own two or more.

The typical "poor" American has more living space than the average inhabitant of London, Paris or Vienna. All these statistics are available from census data for anyone who cares to look.

But these statistics are no consolation to the people involved. Neither they (nor most of us) think to compare our lives with people who lived a century ago. Nor do we care much about life on the other side of the world. Instead, we compare ourselves to those around us. That's human nature.

If you know people with a home, then you want one. If you know people with a car, then you want one. If you know people with a big screen TV, nice furniture and a washing machine, then you want those things, too. You want them so badly, you might make bad choices to get them. Many do.

I wish it were possible to talk about this in a calm, rational way. We call people "poor" when they can't make ends meet, forgetting those ends are part of a living standard unprecedented in human history. But it's hard to bring that up without sounding like an insensitive jerk. At least, I can't figure out how.

But I think we've got to try. The modern welfare state has long since gone past food, clothing and shelter. It is now about having a certain quality of life relative to everybody else. It is not about poverty, it is about being "fair." Unless and until we come to grips with this fundamental fact, we will never solve the problem of the working poor. We've got the wrong definition of "poor," and it is not working.

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