

Alleviating domestic child poverty is not complicated

We were just doing it, and then we stopped.

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The end of June was also the end of a program that, for more than two years, greatly expanded the US Department of Agriculture’s food assistance efforts. When schools shut down for the pandemic in March 2020, Congress permitted the USDA to issue waivers for schools to offer free lunches to all school-age children, without eligibility restrictions or the intimidating paperwork that comes with them. The waiver program also loosened restrictions on the USDA’s summer meals service, allowing it to provide 30 times more meals than it had before.

This year, Congress allowed the program to expire.

The 2021 expansion of two tax credits for households with children met a similar fate. Last year, taxpayers received periodic checks from the IRS as down payments on one of the credits—the child tax credit—which was newly and fully available even to those with too little income to owe taxes in the first place.

This also proved a fleeting piece of assistance to struggling families. The tax credit expansion was for 2021 only, and Congress has not acted to extend it.

These were both anti-poverty initiatives. Both were easier to administer and use than many federal programs are—the school lunch program because it was universal rather than eligibility-based, the tax credits because they came in cash rather than as an in-kind benefit. And both specifically targeted children.

This last point is what is most shocking about the way these poverty supports were allowed to quietly slip away. Even for those who endorse a tough-love approach to anti-poverty work—stressing work, thrift, and responsibility rather than direct assistance—there must be better, more ethical ways to incentivize parental behavior than to deprive their children of food and other basic necessities.

What's more, we've heard for decades from skeptics who are convinced that public anti-poverty programs simply don't work—that they're inefficient and ineffective. But at least with these particular programs, such an objection has now been plainly proved wrong. A month after the child tax credit checks started going out, the Census Bureau reported that 24 percent fewer households with children were experiencing food insecurity and 8 percent fewer were experiencing financial hardship. When the expansion expired this January, 3.7 million children fell into poverty. Now child nutrition faces a similar setback in the wake of the USDA program's expiration. If ever there was any doubt, after two years we can say this with confidence: these programs help lift and keep children out of poverty. Even in the current economic climate, when high inflation advises against too much government spending, choices could be made to prioritize this basic moral issue.

From a policy perspective, alleviating domestic child poverty is not a terribly complex problem. The far deeper issue is legislators' lack of consensus as to whether we should bother. Don't let them tell you that programs like expanded tax credits and universal free lunch don't work—we've already seen that they do. Yet many oppose them, while others fail to prioritize them. That's to the great shame of our leaders and our nation.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Making children poor again."