**The Nature of Poverty**

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Lately it seems as though every few months there’s another urban riot and the nation turns its attention to urban poverty. And in the midst of every storm, there are people crying out that we should finally get serious about this issue. This time it was [Jon Stewart who spoke for many when he said](http://thedailyshow.cc.com/extended-interviews/69wmkr/exclusive-george-stephanopoulos-extended-interview): “And you just wonder sometimes if we’re spending a trillion dollars to rebuild Afghanistan’s schools, like, we can’t build a little taste down Baltimore way. Like is that what’s really going on?”

The audience applauded loudly, and it’s a nice sentiment, but it’s not really relevant.

The problem is not lack of attention, and it’s not mainly lack of money. Since 1980 federal antipoverty spending has exploded. [As Robert Samuelson of The Washington Post has pointed out](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/robert-j-samuelson-how-we-won--and-lost--the-war-on-poverty/2014/01/12/9bf4696e-7a24-11e3-b1c5-739e63e9c9a7_story.html), in 2013 the federal government spent nearly $14,000 per poor person. If you simply took that money and handed it to the poor, a family of four would have a household income roughly twice the poverty rate.

Yet over the last 30 years the poverty rate has scarcely changed.

In addition, American public spending on schools is high by global standards. [As Peter Wehner pointed out in Commentary](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/2015/04/29/what-jon-stewart-and-george-stephanopoulos-got-wrong/), in 2011 Baltimore ranked second among the nation’s largest 100 school districts in how much it spent per pupil, $15,483 per year.

The Sandtown-Winchester area of Baltimore, where Freddie Gray lived, has not lacked for attention either. In the late 1980s, Baltimore’s then-Mayor Kurt Schmoke decided he would make the neighborhood a model of urban restoration. He gathered public and private actors like developer James Rouse and Habitat for Humanity. They raised more than $130 million and poured it into everything from new homes, new school curriculums, new job training programs and new health care centers. Townhouses were built for $87,000 and sold to residents for $37,000.

The money was not totally wasted. By 2000, the poverty rate in the area had dropped by 4.4 percent. The share of residents who lived in owner-occupied homes had risen by 8.3 percent, according to a thorough study by The Abell Foundation. But the area was not transformed. Today there are no grocery stores in the neighborhood and no restaurants. Crime is rampant. Unemployment is high.

Despite all these efforts, there are too many young men leading lives like the one Gray led. He was apparently a kind-hearted, respectful, popular man, but he was not on the path to upward mobility. He won a settlement for lead paint poisoning. [According to The Washington Post](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/freddie-was-our-family/2015/04/24/662956a2-e9d4-11e4-9a6a-c1ab95a0600b_story.html), his mother was a heroin addict who, in a deposition, said she couldn’t read. In one court filing, it was reported that Gray was four grade levels behind in reading. He was arrested more than a dozen times.

It is wrong to say federal efforts to tackle poverty have been a failure. The $15 trillion spent by the government over the past half-century has improved living standards and eased burdens for millions of poor people. But all that money and all those experiments have not integrated people who live in areas of concentrated poverty into the mainstream economy. Often, the money has served as a cushion, not a ladder.

Saying we should just spend more doesn’t really cut it. What’s needed is a phase shift in how we think about poverty. Renewal efforts in Sandtown-Winchester prioritized bricks and mortar. But the real barriers to mobility are matters of social psychology, the quality of relationships in a home and a neighborhood that either encourage or discourage responsibility, future-oriented thinking, and practical ambition.

Jane Jacobs once wrote that a healthy neighborhood is like a ballet, a series of intricate interactions in which people are regulating each other and encouraging certain behaviors.

In [a fantastic interview that David Simon of “The Wire” gave to Bill Keller for The Marshall Project](https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/04/29/david-simon-on-baltimore-s-anguish), he describes that, even in poorest Baltimore, there once were informal rules of behavior governing how cops interacted with citizens — when they’d drag them in and when they wouldn’t, what curse words you could say to a cop and what you couldn’t. But then the code dissolved. The informal guardrails of life were gone, and all was arbitrary harshness.

Individuals are left without the norms that middle-class people take for granted. It is phenomenally hard for young people in such circumstances to guide themselves.

Yes, jobs are necessary, but if you live in a neighborhood, as Gray did, where half the high school students don’t bother to show up for school on a given day, then the problems go deeper.

The world is waiting for a thinker who can describe poverty through the lens of social psychology. Until the invisible bonds of relationships are repaired, life for too many will be nasty, brutish, solitary and short.