

OPINIONS

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Orphanages aren't real issue

"Bring back the orphanages!" For some, this new Republican slogan brings to mind simpler times of clearer moral values. For others, it conjures up

Dickensian portraits of empty stomachs and sadistic caretakers and is a sign of how regressive GOP rule could become.

Although the proposal to put more poor children into institutional care has become a hot-button issue, there has been little discussion of its practicality and of the effect it would have on poor families. A clear-eyed view of the numbers shows that for the Republicans this debate is about political symbols, not realistic programs.

Although there are several competing GOP plans, the idea is to deny welfare payments to unwed mothers in order to reduce illegitimacy and to encourage

DOUGLAS J.
BESHAROV

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them to work or get married. Without welfare, many single mothers would not be able to take care of their children, and often whole families would be placed in group homes or the children would be placed in orphanages or put up for adoption.

The U.S. has thousands of "congregate care facilities" — the preferred term for orphanages. They house about 30,000 children — as opposed to 420,000 in foster care — and few are the barracks-like buildings of the past; most are small group homes caring for fewer than 15 children. Typically these children did poorly in foster care and were placed in institutions to give them more stable, structured care. We need more of these institutions, especially for children with serious behavior problems. But they are no substitute for true welfare reform.

About half of today's 5 million welfare families are headed by a mother who never married. Thus, if the Republican hard-liners had their way, more than 2.5 million unwed mothers could be denied welfare, and their 5 million children would face placement. That would be 10 times the number now in foster and institutional care.

Proponents of orphanages argue that this worst-case situation will never arise because the threat of losing their children would have a prophylactic effect on single mothers. But even if out-of-wedlock births declined by 50 percent over the long term — a wildly unprecedented effect for any government welfare program — about 2.6 million children would still be denied welfare.

Proponents also say that relatives might take in many of those children (and their unwed mothers, too). But about 50 percent of unwed mothers on welfare already live with relatives. And these relatives tend to be equally impoverished; almost 90 percent of unwed teen-agers come from families with incomes below

the poverty line. Today's multigenerational welfare households survive by sharing income; take away payments to single mothers and many extended families would break up.

If the plan contained in the contract is unlikely to drive many children into institutional care, why all the talk about orphanages?

Even if 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 \$36,000 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 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 GOP intends to follow up its talk of orphanages with strong leg-

islation. But Newt Gingrich and his colleagues have already blinked. 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 were 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-age mother had another baby after she turned 18, she wouldn't be denied 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-age mothers already living at home? And why promise new benefits for children born after a teen-age 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 undercuts support 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.

Douglas J. Besharov, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, is visiting professor of welfare policy at the University of Maryland School of Public Affairs.