



Can three not-always-easy steps solve poverty?



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Here's something to get everyone in the back-to-school spirit, something that might seem like a complicated math problem, but turns out to be a simple equation:

$chs + wft + wuy > 2lamthc = ? < cop$

Solution: completing high school plus working full-time plus wait-

ing until you're over 21 and married to have children equals an infinitely smaller chance of poverty.

That's it?

"The poverty rate drops like a stone if you do all that," says Isabel V. Sawhill.

Sawhill is a Brookings Institution fellow and longtime poverty researcher whom I'd called after sighing to the point of hyperventilation over something in our coverage this week of the Madison Park North apartments in Reservoir Hill.

Citing open drug dealing and rampant crime, the city is seeking to revoke the owner's license to operate a multifamily dwelling and find somewhere else for the tenants to live.

It's not a new strategy — the city went through a similar process to tear down the Pall Mall Apartments a couple of years ago. Nor, of course, is there anything new about my, or anyone's, reaction to a side-light in our coverage — one of the stories and photos included a Madison Park resident who at 27 already was the mother of seven.

Before I wade into full judgmental territory here, I should say that, on an individual level, it's none of my business how many children someone decides to have. There are just as surely good, young mothers of huge broods — no, not necessarily Kate Plus you-know-how-many — as there are terrible, older mothers of one.

But it's impossible to look at the larger issue of poverty, and the particularly deep pockets of it in cities such as Baltimore, without considering factors like young, single motherhood.

Which is why simply getting rid of places like Madison Park North or Pall Mall feels like just a lot of rearranging of the deck chairs. It's not a bad thing, of course — no one should have to live in such hazardous, rat- and crime-infested conditions — but it doesn't change the

much as just relocate it.

As it turns out, I'd just read a book review by the always provocative John McWhorter in *The New Republic* that has generated a lot of online chatter. In reviewing a book by Amy Wax called "Race, Wrongs, and Remedies: Group Justice in the 21st Century," McWhorter hailed what he called "a disarmingly simple calculus" first introduced by Sawhill and another policy wonk, Christopher Jencks, for avoiding poverty: the aforementioned trio of staying in school, keeping a job and delaying childbirth until you're grown up and married.

Sawhill has thought about this a long time, through postings in think tanks and the Clinton administration, professorships at Goucher and Georgetown, and her role as a founder and now president of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

She has been in the thick of the long-running debate over whether government programs such as welfare help move people out of poverty or allow recipients to not work or finish school and have babies out of wedlock.

"It's a chicken-or-egg question," she told me.

"Do these behaviors cause poverty or does poverty cause these behaviors?"

As usual, the answer is never as clear-cut as the question. "Of course, it's some of both," Sawhill said. "I think we need government assistance, but it needs to be coupled with encouragement to exercise personal responsibility."

She pointed me to an astonishing chart in a recent book she wrote with Ron Haskins, "Creating an Opportunity Society." Crunching census, income and other data, they found that of those who adhered to the holy trio of finishing high school, keeping a job and delaying parenthood, only 2 percent ended up poor.

A 98 percent chance of escaping poverty? As close to fail-safe as you're going to get when human beings are involved, I'd say.

Of course, as simple as the formula is, simple doesn't mean easy. There are still factors beyond an individual's control — such as the economy. The current recession, Sawhill says, is making it harder to fulfill one of the three goals, full-time employment.

"It's really hard," she said, "to eliminate poverty in people's lives."

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