

# Indivisible

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Too often, our political debates cast personal and social responsibility as ideas in opposition to each other. Those who emphasize social responsibility and highlight the structural and economic causes of social problems are seen as ignoring the responsibilities of individuals for their own fate. Those who emphasize personal responsibility and highlight the ways in which individual decisions lie behind high rates of crime, teen pregnancy, and family breakup are seen as indifferent to social justice and the obligations of the community toward its least privileged members.

It's true, of course, that advocates of social responsibility sometimes understate the responsibilities of individuals, and those who stress personal responsibility are sometimes unwilling to acknowledge the high costs of racial discrimination and economic inequalities. But if ever there was a false choice, this is it. Of course we are responsible for ourselves and for our own decisions. All of us are called upon to be responsible in our own lives. But surely social responsibility is a component of individual responsibility. We are responsible for ourselves, but also for our families and those we love, for our communities and, ultimately, for our country, and our world. To pick a classic example: family breakup is often a cause of poverty. But poverty is often a cause for family breakup. High crime rates

are caused by the acts of irresponsible individuals. But high crime rates are associated with poverty. To put matters simply: Poverty causes crime, and crime causes poverty.

The great social scientist James Q. Wilson spoke a powerful conservative truth when he declared: “In the long run, the public interest depends on private virtue.” But there is a comparable liberal truth: that private virtue can be nurtured by wise public policy and thoughtful public action. David Shipler put it well in his 2004 book, *The Working Poor* when he called for a war on poverty that “recognizes both the society’s obligation through government and business, and the individual’s obligation through labor and family.”

In the struggle against teen and unplanned pregnancy, real progress came when we put aside culture-war arguments. This issue, more than almost any other, reminds us that a great social need — the care and well-being of children — is best met when individuals behave responsibly. But the success achieved in lowering teen pregnancy rates in the 1990s especially depended powerfully on social factors ranging from new public policies to rising prosperity that afforded new opportunities to young women.

Liberals tend to speak out against one set of sins: materialism, prejudice, racism, sexism, a lack of individual and social generosity. Conservatives tend to speak out against a different set of sins: personal irresponsibility, hedonism, a lack of regard for the importance of family life and the responsibilities of parenthood. We would do well to end this fruitless argument over which sins are worse. We should try to discover the virtues that help us overcome both sets of human frailties by remembering that individual responsibility and the common good are indivisible.

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