



Robert Doar on *A Safety Net That Works*

December 2017 podcast episode transcript

Featuring [Robert Doar](#), Morgridge Fellow in Poverty Studies, American Enterprise Institute

Hosted by Dave Chancellor

Chancellor Hello and thanks for joining us for the December 2017 episode of the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor.

For this episode, I had the privilege of hearing from Robert Doar, who's the Morgridge Fellow in Poverty Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and, before that, had a long career working in and often leading some of the largest social service agencies and programs in the country in New York City and State.

We talked over the phone back in March of this year, not long after the release of a volume he edited called *A Safety Net That Works*. The volume itself includes chapters on several federal safety net programs from researchers and former practitioners aimed at helping policymakers and others understand how these programs work—with suggestions from the authors on how they could be made to work better.

First, I asked Doar about his current position and how he came to it.

Doar I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, where my father had come and moved the family to help start an antipoverty program in Bedford-Stuyvesant in central Brooklyn. He had been in the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department during the 1960s and had become friendly with Robert Kennedy who had wanted to start this program in the late 60s. I was a youngster then, and that's where I grew up, watching the development of that. And that led me, in part, to want to work in programs and public policy that would lead to better outcomes for low-income Americans. As a result of that interest and participation, I got my first opportunity to really get to work on those topics when Governor Pataki asked me to be the Child Support Enforcement Director in New York State in 1995. And I was sort of was in the social services bureaucracy from then until three years ago when I left my final position as the commissioner of social services in New York City, to come here to the American Enterprise Institute to set up a poverty studies unit, to study and research and comment on issues concerning the large safety net programs in the United States.

Chancellor Doar became New York's Child Support Enforcement Director just before federal welfare reform or, if you prefer, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, was signed into law. I asked him to share his observations about this time period and what he saw as the results of this major change to the structure of the safety net.

Doar I joined before President Clinton had signed the Act. New York State and other states had been moving in that direction for the old AFDC program, which was a cash welfare program for single parents with children. But we really, we were invigorated by the passage of the Act. And I was a foot soldier, a front line worker in some respects of the implementation of that program in a state that was very heavily the other way. It was more of an entitlement state and a welfare rights state. And I saw work rates for never-married mothers rise quite dramatically in a way that had not happened through other programs.

Doar, continued And I saw poverty decline quite dramatically in the late 1990s and early 2000s in way that I have not seen in other periods. And of course I saw caseload decline. And I also didn't see any increase at all in very low food security or food security measures. I didn't see a significant increase in child welfare incidences. There are always difficulties and there are problems, but statistically, that late 1990s period, going into the early 2000s and even going into today -- and we can talk about that -- this worry that that significant reform would lead to very serious, difficult, appalling hardship, just didn't happen. In fact, people got a lot better. Incomes rose, poverty went down, work rates went up.

Chancellor In recent years, researchers—notably Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer—have found evidence that deep poverty, with levels of hardship characterized by people living on very low or no cash income, became worse following implementation of federal welfare reform. So I asked Doar how he thinks the safety net should respond to the needs of those people.

Doar I do want to say I know Kathy and Luke very well and I like their work. I think the data on the extent to which people in deep poverty has gotten worse is very weak and it's not clear to me it has anything to do with the welfare reform of 1996. Now, having said that, now there are people who are in deep poverty and there are people who are reporting to government that they are living only on food stamp benefits and they may also be on Medicaid, and those families I think should be addressed -- I don't write them off. I think we should do something about households that report to the SNAP program that all they're on is SNAP and they have no earnings and they would like Medicaid as well -- just give me the card and I'll see you in a year. I want to address those families because you can't live on food stamp benefits alone. And what I want to do is engage them, I want to have case management services and efforts be made to find out what's really going on there -- even if it's a small group, which I think it is, who are living, as Kathy depicts it, on less than \$2 a day. And as I say, on the data, when you really look at it, the less than \$2 a day, it was less than \$2 a day in cash. It wasn't taking into account in-kind benefits. And the way in which those data are collected through surveys are often susceptible to underreporting and non-response, which makes the data suspect. And finally, if it's occurred, it's probably occurred more in single person households without children than it has in households with children.

Chancellor And in cases like this, Doar says he generally believes it makes sense to design programs in a way that targets and best serves the majority of potential recipients.

Doar And that's what happened in TANF. We established a work expectation and a work requirement and the vast majority of the people who came to that program benefitted from that new approach in my opinion and I think there's a lot of data to show that. Others it may not have worked for, and what I was really trying to say is that rather than change the whole program that was successful for all those other people in order to address this smaller group, let's find a way to get to that smaller group while remaining, keeping the benefits of the larger initiative and the work requirements in place. And in my judgment, the way to do that is through the SNAP program, which is very much in these families' households and we know their addresses, we know where they are, we know what they report with regard to earnings, we know their phone numbers. And we have an elaborate system of state and local workers in the food stamp program who could at least engage them in a little effort to find out how they can be helped getting into work.

Chancellor For Doar, this focus on understanding the workings of a program and how its current resources can be employed to target specific goals guided his approach to putting together the volume *A Safety Net that Works*.

Doar The safety net in the United States as funded by the federal government is large and it's multifaceted and it's hard to follow and understand for anyone, including me, and I've been in it for a long time. I wanted to assemble an interesting collection of experts, either former practitioners, or researchers, or academics, to write about the particular program that they knew best and to write short chapters that describe where we were today, what the purpose of the program was, how successful it was, what its problems were, and how we could make them better. And I come from -- if you were going to put me on a political chart -- I'm

Doar, right of center so I was looking for scholars who might be right of center, though I didn't have partisan
continued decision about it, I just had an interest in people who might come at it from a perspective that was not necessarily your traditional progressive approach. And that led me to some very fine people who both worked in the program or studied the program whether it was in housing or in food stamp benefits or child welfare or child care or early learning or Medicaid or cash welfare or child support enforcement —I wrote the chapter on child support enforcement. And each of the authors were empowered to write what they wanted to write and we tried to make the style similar and bring it together into a comprehensive volume.

Chancellor Doar says he's a believer in dealing with the world as it is and primarily focuses on ways to address what he sees as shortcomings in the social safety net from within the bounds of current programs.

Doar These programs have been built up over many years. They are effective. We do a lot in the United States to alleviate material hardship among poor Americans and we do a lot to try to help them get into work. We could do more and we could do it better, but we do do a lot. And these large safety net programs, whether it's the Medicaid program or the food stamp program, or one of the other big ones. They're probably not going to be blown up and turned upside down tomorrow. Although Medicaid is maybe a potential exception right now, given the current discussion. And so I tried to deal with authors who were interested in making incremental, step by step improvements. That's what my experience in this world has led me to believe is what happens mostly, is we make improvements or we go backwards, but we don't often do major revolutionary change to the whole system all at once. So that's what I was trying to do, is present to policymakers, to staffers in the Senate and House, to commissioners around the country, a one-place, comprehensive look at all of the major programs from the perspective of experts in the field.

Chancellor One goal of this volume and a point that Doar emphasizes is that debates around issues concerning low-income Americans benefit from multiple voices and multiple perspectives.

Doar And I think part of what I was trying to do with A Safety Net that Works volume was to bring some perspectives that in the typical discussion, especially in the academic community, might not always be recognized. And I think we benefit from that. I benefit from hearing multiple perspectives and I think others benefit from hearing perspectives that are different from them. And so, as I said earlier today to you, I had Professor Raj Chetty here at AEI today and he's doing some outstanding work about seeing how different places lead to greater upward mobility -- a higher percentage of people who were born in the bottom fifth income decile rise to the middle or the top. And I think that discussion was really worthwhile and I think his work points to what the objective really is and that is to help people not just support themselves with a sufficient material resources, but to actually be able to help them move up and increase their earnings for themselves and their families.

Chancellor This focus on helping families find ways to support themselves, which is of course alluded to in the title A Safety Net that Works, runs throughout the volume, so I asked Doar what his goals and hopes for the future are when it comes to thinking about low-income Americans and the safety net.

Doar My goal is to increase the number of Americans who have earnings sufficient so that the resources in their household are over the poverty line. I also want to increase the number of Americans who have earnings plus various forms of support that take them above the poverty line. I want to reduce the number of Americans who have to rely only on government programs to keep them above the poverty line. Those are my goals. Now, in all of those goals there are always outcomes that are also acceptable. Again, some people are disabled, some people are seniors, some people are children. I don't expect them to work and earn their own success and I want to have programs that provide enough assistance to them so that they can enjoy the dignity of American life. Those are my goals. I would just point out that thankfully, right now, we had a good year in 2015. The data on poverty got a little bit better and earnings rose. I'm hopeful that when the data for 2016 comes out in September 2017 we're going to see some more progress and I think that's good. Another sort of simple goal is that I would like that progress to continue.

Chancellor Thanks to Robert Doar for taking the time to talk with us. A Safety Net that Works, which includes chapters from national experts on SNAP, Medicaid, housing policy, child support enforcement, TANF, the EITC, and a number of other programs is available as a PDF download on the American Enterprise Institute's website.

This podcast was supported as part of a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation but its contents don't necessarily represent the opinions or policies of that Office or the Institute for Research on Poverty.

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