

Means-testing Social Security: The kiss of death

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MEANS-TESTING SOCIAL SECURITY is a proposal that some policy-makers are considering. That would be the beginning of the end for the program. When Social Security was first begun, in 1935 during the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, some people proposed means-testing it as they means-tested Aid to Dependent Children (now TANF, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families). Roosevelt resisted it, knowing that would make it politically vulnerable. In order to protect it, Social Security needed to be universal. The rich as well as the poor would receive it.

The idea of not giving government money to the rich has an appeal on the surface, and is gaining some adherence. Why should the rich get money when the poor need it more? But Roosevelt knew, as the British social welfare scholar Richard Titmuss said, "Programs for the poor are poor programs." Witness the means-tested program for children which was begun at the same time as Social Security, as part of the Social Security Act. Women who worked for the Children's Bureau created the program. They believed that assistance should go only to the deserving, and that parents needed to be supervised closely to insure they used the money wisely. Mothers were not included in the program until 1950. Since its beginnings ADC (later AFDC, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, when fathers were included) has been intrusive and stingy and the recipients have been subjected to arbitrary and capricious treatment by caseworkers. While it began as an entitlement, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 removed its entitlement status. It is now used as a club to browbeat mothers into finding work that often does not exist, and when it does, does not pay enough to support a family. Its main goal is to force people off the rolls, and it has succeeded at that.

In contrast to that mean-spirited program, Social Security was crafted by men with male workers in mind.

Another means-tested program is the state sponsored General Assistance, or General Relief. It is for able-bodied unemployed people without children to support. It has been the first program to be cut when states face fiscal problems. Most states no longer have it, and there is no assistance except for food stamps for able-bodied unemployed people if they do not qualify for unemployment benefits. (They were even prohibited from getting food stamps until a few years ago.)

What is our answer to people who say the country could save money if they didn't give Social Security to rich people? The answer is to recoup the money paid to them through progressive taxation. There is no reason rich people shouldn't be taxed at a higher rate than poor people.