

The Media, the Poor, and SSI

Category: Social Policy

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I wrote a letter to the Boston Globe in response to a series of 3 articles that appeared in the Globe describing how parents are desperately trying to get their children on SSI (Supplemental Security Income) and are persuading doctors to prescribe medication so the children will be eligible.

The Globe articles said that SSI rolls have increased dramatically, and emphasized how parents are gaming the system. It mentions that the parents are desperately poor and some have lost their welfare assistance, but the article doesn't go into what has happened with TANF (called TAFDC, Temporary Assistance to Families with Dependent Children, in Massachusetts). The pictures that accompanied the article showed Hispanic and black mothers. I wrote to Patricia Wen, the author of the articles, and protested this. She replied that she is a member of a minority group and "sensitive to those issues."

The day after her articles appeared, another article appeared saying that Senator Scott Brown, newly elected Republican Senator from Massachusetts, plans to take up the SSI issue in Congress.

I wrote an earlier letter to the Globe saying they should study TAFDC in order to understand why mothers are so desperate to get their children on SSI, but the Globe didn't publish it. I have a large file of unpublished letters to the Globe, and I don't expect they will publish this one.

Following is the letter I wrote:

To the Editor:

When I saw Patricia Wen's series of 3 articles on SSI (Supplemental Security Income), I said, "Here we go again. This is the opening salvo against SSI." President Reagan slashed SSI, and conservatives have been hacking away at it ever since.

Scott Brown, sniffing away like a bloodhound for a conservative cause he can champion, saw his chance in those articles and is leading the charge in Congress to slash SSI.

If the Globe did a series on TAFDC, assistance to low-income families, we would understand why mothers are so eager to get SSI assistance. Many mothers have been cut off TAFDC due to the 2-year time limit, and if they can't find a job or are unable to work, they need help.

Media coverage leading up to the 1996 welfare "reform" bill featured stories about welfare cheats. Now we are hearing about mothers cheating on SSI. But the real cheats are the vendors (pharmacies, doctors, dentists, nursing homes, hospitals, and makers of medical equipment). A Massachusetts study found that 93 percent of welfare cheating was done by those vendors.

Conservatives slash means tested assistance programs first because poor people have no political clout. Then they attack the universal programs of Social Security and Medicare. The current talk about means-testing Social Security is the opening salvo in the war against Social Security.

Betty Reid Mandell