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Op-ed: Holcomb's end to federal jobless aid just another way of saying the poor are lazy

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So, you think poor people are the problem?

Watching recent debates on government relief in the wake of the pandemic, I hear a troubling narrative that goes something like this: Poor people create their own misery — they lack drive; they make bad or even amoral choices.

But having served as a pastor for more than 50 years, my experience tells me that most folks, including me, are a mixed bag, regardless of income. And most of us are doing just about the best we can.

So, when our governor stopped paying people federal unemployment benefits as of June 19 — well ahead of the early September end to the assistance — it gave me pause. Gov. Eric Holcomb said benefits incentivized people to stay home, rather than get back to work. His action appears to follow the troubling narrative: folks are just lazy — they must be forced back into being productive.

But is that story true?

If \$300 a week on top of state benefits looks better than a paycheck in some of these households, then what does that say about wages being offered to these stay-at-homers? Might low wages actually be a factor? Our minimum wage is \$7.25 in Indiana, yet according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Living Wage Calculator, it takes \$13.44 an hour to lift a single person to a living wage.

In fact, some companies have raised wages — most notably, Amazon. Turns out, they are not having trouble finding unskilled workers.

But economists warn it's not that simple. As the cost of doing business increases (paying more for labor), consumer prices rise – so inflation threatens. Then it takes even higher wages to reach a living wage – and a vicious cycle churns.

It seems we have a systemic problem: an economic system that – left unchecked – would balance itself on the backs of those least able to afford it.

Many of the provisions of recent relief packages – including unemployment payments – showed us in real time what a difference our government can make in addressing hardships of so many of our poorest citizens – and prevent greater costs (from health care to crime) down the road for all of us.

For example, the child tax credit in the American Rescue Plan is expected to move millions of children out of poverty, reduce hunger and narrow the racial wealth gap exacerbated by unemployment as a result of COVID-19. Here's where to learn more and sign up.

Bread for the World, in which I participate, and so many other organizations that seek to end hunger and poverty notes it's possible to do both: to help folks get back to work and help low-wage workers thrive.

If we blame poor people, then we come up with plans that, in the long run, not only make their lives worse, but that simply don't work. But if we understand the system itself is flawed, then we work to create policies that balance things, so everyone thrives.

Let's write that story: Ask Congress to make the child tax credit permanent.

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