

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

February 17, 1970

Professor Joshua Lederberg
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Stanford, California 94305

Dear Professor Lederberg:

I saw and appreciated your column of February 7 in the Washington Post. The twin debates over ending poverty and dealing with the population problem will be the critical debates of the 70's. Understanding of the relation between the two is of the highest importance.

I note, from the penciled footnote you have made to your article, that you share my belief that Congressman Anderson's "baby bonus" argument is probably misguided. I feel very strongly that this is in fact the case. Enclosed is a brief sampling of the lengthy bibliography which has convinced me that a \$50 children's allowance will not increase the birthrate in the United States. The key facts, I think, are as follows:

1. In the United States the existing income tax exemption for dependent children is a children's allowance. It is actually worth up to \$450 per child for the wealthy. It is worth absolutely nothing to the poor. Yet the birthrate of the poor exceeds that of the rich.
2. Again in the United States, AFDC provides a substantial means tested children's allowance to the poor. Because the size of that allowance varies greatly from state to state, we have a test situation concerning the effect of children's allowances on family size. HEW has just prepared a study which shows conclusively that large family size does not correlate with large AFDC payments for additional children. In fact, the correlation is precisely the opposite--the lower the state's per child payment the larger the average welfare family size.

3. In France, particularly, but in many other countries as well, avowedly pro-natalist children's allowances which are coupled with all kinds of maternity and child-rearing benefits have had no significant effect on birthrate either as compared with previous birthrate or as compared to the birthrate of other nations.
4. Those who I have consulted or read, people like Alvin Schorr (Social Policy and Income Maintenance), Arthur Campbell of HEW (Population Research), Vera Shlakman (Columbia School of Social Work), Vincent Whitney (Demographer) and many others are unanimously of the opinion that children's allowances, like other cash incentives or disincentives, have virtually nothing to do with the birthrate. They tell me that this opinion is broadly, nearly unanimously, shared by their colleagues.

The importance of clearing the political air on the question of the relation between badly needed assistance for the poor family and the undesirable "side-effect" of overpopulation cannot be overstated. I think that your attribution of the problem to the existence of an underprivileged class goes directly to the point. Throughout history and in every study I know, extreme deprivation and family breakdown have correlated superbly with a high birthrate. This correlation exists in the United States today. It exists despite the well documented fact that poor women do not choose to have larger families than middle or upper class women.

Given these facts, I believe that if the country is really serious about limiting population growth it ought to start by breaking the cycle of poverty and despair that turns today's poor child into the mother or father of tomorrow's large poor family. This longer range strategy should also be supplemented by a vigorous family planning effort along the lines suggested by Dr. Beasley in the enclosed testimony. Obviously, from the results achieved by the Doctor and from the fact that the poor do not want any more children than the rich, family planning has yet to realize anything like its full potential.

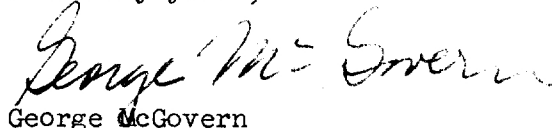
I fear that you may be right when you say that some sort of "experiment" in cash birth disincentives may be necessary simply to demonstrate that such disincentives do not work (except, perhaps, at astronomical levels). But I hope that every possible effort to educate people will be made before the choice of penalizing the poor to prove an already well proven point is made.

One last note on the matter of cost. The \$35 billion figure which I mentioned as the long-term cost of public assistance, children's allowances, a guaranteed job, and improvements in social security, should be distinguished from the 8-10 billion initial cost of the children's allowance. (It would cost 20 billion when fully operative in 1976.)

I hope that this material will be helpful and that you will continue to write on the subject of the children's allowance and the population problem. If I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to write.

With kind regards,

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George McGovern". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

George McGovern

Enclosures