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The austere US safety net for poor, non-elderly adults who are not raising children and do not receive disability benefits

Robert Greenstein

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Abstract

Over the past half-century, the U.S. safety net (i.e., the set of tax and transfer programs) has grown significantly stronger overall and especially for elderly people and children. But that has not been the case for non-elderly adults (aged 18-64) who are not raising children and do not receive federal disability benefits, a group that numbered nearly 106 million people in 2017. A new analysis of Census data conducted for this paper shows that in 2017, the safety net lifted out of poverty 69 percent of elderly people who would otherwise be poor and 44 percent of otherwise-poor children, both of which were dramatically higher percentages than in 1970. Among otherwise-poor childless adults not receiving disability benefits, however, the safety net lifted only 8 percent out of poverty in 2017, a percentage virtually unchanged since 1970. Today, one of every two Americans who lives in deep poverty—below 50 percent of the poverty line—is a non-elderly childless adult who does not receive disability benefits. These individuals also comprise the bulk of the homeless population. This paper explores these data and the large gaps in safety-net support for this population. It also considers various options at both federal and state levels that could strengthen support for this highly disadvantaged group.

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Introduction

Over the past half century or so, the United States (U.S.) safety net (i.e., the set of government taxes and transfer programs) has grown significantly stronger overall and particularly for children (aged 17 and younger) and elderly adults (aged 65 and older), though the progress has not been smooth and has featured cutbacks as well as expansions. But the story has been starkly different for one particular group: non-elderly adults (aged 18 to 64)[1] who are not raising children (a group we refer to as non-elderly childless adults) and do not receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits or Social Security benefits. This group numbered nearly 106 million people in 2017, or nearly 33 percent of the U.S. noninstitutionalized population (see box 2).

As Census data that Danilo Trisi analyzed for this paper demonstrate, the safety net lifts out of poverty a far smaller percentage of non-elderly childless adults who are not receiving disability benefits than it lifts out of poverty for other groups. In 2017, while the safety net lifted out of poverty 69 percent of elderly adults who would otherwise be poor and 44 percent of otherwise-poor children, it lifted from poverty only 8 percent of otherwise-poor non-elderly childless adults who were not receiving disability benefits (Trisi 2023a; see box 1).

Moreover, with the safety net for these non-elderly childless adults so limited, those non-elderly childless adults who are poor tend to be poorer than others living in poverty. One of every two Americans who lives in deep poverty—i.e., with income below half of the poverty line—is a non-elderly childless adult who does not receive disability benefits. Adult-only households also comprise more than 70 percent of households that are homeless, according to data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD 2023a). And childless adults with low earnings are the only group in America that the federal tax code taxes into, or deeper into, poverty.

The gap between what the safety net does for non-elderly childless adults who are not receiving disability benefits and what it does for other groups has widened considerably over the past half-century. The federal government neither operates nor funds any broad cash assistance program for very poor non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits, and most states have either eliminated the cash assistance programs they used to run for this population or cut the programs sharply. In addition, the 1996 federal welfare law limited benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp program) to three months out of every three years for childless adults under age 50 who are not working or participating in a qualified training program for at least 20 hours a week and are not considered disabled or incapacitated. And, due to inadequate funding, 80 percent of low-income renters who are non-elderly childless adults and are eligible for federal rental assistance do not receive it. Moreover, while health insurance coverage has expanded for non-elderly childless adults who are not receiving receive disability benefits, millions of those adults continue to lack coverage—especially in states that have declined to adopt the Affordable Care Act's (ACA) Medicaid expansion, which sought to extend health coverage to this group.

Policymakers at both federal and state levels could consider a menu of options to strengthen support for poor non-elderly childless adults who are not receiving disability benefits. Federal policymakers could consider measures such as (1) strengthening the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for childless low-income workers, (2) giving states stronger financial incentives to broaden eligibility for unemployment insurance (UI), (3) reviving and strengthening a subsidized jobs program put in place temporarily during the Great Recession of 2008–9, (4) providing federal financial assistance for a specified number of weeks or months to working-age adults who are looking diligently for work but who cannot find a job and who qualify for only very small UI benefits or none at all, (5) easing SNAP restrictions on non-elderly childless adults who are out of work, (6) funding more rental assistance, and (7) closing the health insurance coverage gap in states that have not adopted the ACA's Medicaid expansion. State policymakers, meanwhile, could consider measures such as (1) strengthening their own state-level EITCs for low-income childless workers, (2) reviving and strengthening general assistance (GA), (3) securing federal waivers of SNAP's harsh restrictions on this population for areas that qualify for such waivers but whose states have not sought them, (4) providing low-income rental assistance of their own, and (5) adopting the ACA's Medicaid expansion if they have not already done so.

I. How the safety net affects poverty among non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits

Among elderly people in 2017, the safety net lifted out of poverty 69 percent of those who would otherwise be poor. Among children, the safety net lifted 44 percent. And among non-elderly adults who are raising children and do not receive disability benefits, the safety net lifted 38 percent. But for non-elderly childless adults

BOX 1

The poverty data and methodology used in this paper

The poverty data in this paper, which Danilo Trisi analyzed, come from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) and are adjusted for the underreporting of benefit receipt, using the Transfer Income Model (TRIM) of the Urban Institute and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). We use 2017 data to allow for better historical comparisons, because CPS data since 2018 contain changes in how to measure poverty rates. We use the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), with the poverty threshold anchored to 2021; as Wimer and colleagues (2013) have explained, an "advantage of an anchored SPM (or any absolute poverty measure, for that matter) is that poverty trends resulting from such a measure can be explained by changes in income and net transfer payments (cash or in kind). Trends in poverty based on a relative measure [,] . . . on the other hand, could be due to over time changes in the thresholds. Thus, an anchored SPM arguably provides a cleaner measure of how changes in income and net transfer payments have affected poverty historically" (Wimer et al. 2013, 3).

A complete set of the figures that Trisi developed for this paper can be found in Trisi (2023a). For more detail on these data and the methodology behind them, see appendix A in this paper.

who are not receiving SSI disability benefits or Social Security, the safety net lifted only 8 percent (table 1).[2]

The safety net was even weaker for certain subgroups of non-elderly childless adults who do not receive SSI disability benefits or Social Security. Among such adults aged 18-29, the safety net in 2017 lifted out of poverty only 3 percent of those who would otherwise be poor. Among Latino non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits, it lifted just 2 percent.[3]

In addition, adults who are not raising children and earn only modest amounts of income are the only group that the federal tax code taxes into, or deeper into, poverty. The tax code taxes more than 5 million of that group into or deeper into poverty each year because the taxes those individuals pay (mainly payroll taxes) exceed the small (if any) EITC they can receive (Marr 2023). Many of these individuals must also pay state income taxes (Bruch, Van Der Naald, and Gornick 2023).

That does not mean, however, that non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits have higher poverty rates than others. Their poverty rate was 13.3 percent in 2017 (under the Supplemental Poverty Measure or SPM), compared to 14 percent for the overall noninstitutionalized population (Trisi 2023a). This reflects the fact that most childless adults of working age who do not receive disability benefits are working and earning enough to stay above the poverty line. But for those in this group who do not earn or otherwise receive enough income (outside of income from government programs) to avoid poverty, the safety net does little to lift them from poverty.

Moreover, non-elderly childless adults who are poor and do not receive disability benefits tend to be significantly poorer than others who are in poverty. They are much more likely to live in deep poverty, with

TABLE 1

Share of otherwise-poor people lifted out of poverty by government programs, 1970 and 2017

	1970	2017
Total U.S. population	9%	46%
Children (under 18)	–4%*	44%
Non-elderly adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are raising children	–11%*	38%
Elderly adults (65 and over)	37%	69%
Non-elderly childless adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are not raising children	7%	8%

Source: Trisi 2023a.

Note: "Non-elderly adults not receiving disability benefits" refers to individuals aged 18–64 who do not receive SSI disability benefits or Social Security. See table 4 in this paper for a more comprehensive treatment of these data. *A minus sign indicates that income and payroll taxes pushed more people in the group in question from above the poverty line to below it than social programs lifted from below the poverty line to above it. Hence, the net effect of taxes and transfers on this group was to increase poverty rather than reduce it.

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BOX 2

The population in question

Non-elderly adults childless who do not receive disability benefits—the group that is the focus of this paper—numbered 105.5 million in 2017. Some 64 percent were white, 12 percent were Black, and 15 percent were Latino.[a] Some 52 percent were male, and 48 percent were female. Some 30 percent were 18 to 29 years old; 42 percent were 30 to 54; and 28 percent were 55 to 64.

The 14 million of these adults who were poor after taxes and transfer payments were somewhat more diverse, with 48 percent of them white, 19 percent Black, and 22 percent Latino.[a] In addition, they were somewhat younger, with 38 percent of them 18 to 29 years old, 37 percent of them 35 to 54, and 25 percent of them 55 to 64. Those who were poor were split 50–50 between men and women.

Over time, non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits have increased significantly as a share of the U.S. population, rising from 22 percent of the noninstitutionalized population in 1970 to nearly 33 percent in 2017. Like the overall U.S. population, this group has also become more diverse. Between 1970 and 2017, both the share of the overall U.S population that is white and the share of the population of non-elderly childless adults not receiving disability benefits that is white declined 15 percentage points. Meanwhile, the Latino share of the overall population rose 14 percentage points, while the Latino share of non-elderly childless adults not receiving disability benefits rose 12 points (Trisi 2023a).

Although the population in question does not receive SSI or Social Security disability benefits, that does not mean they have no disabilities or health problems that may affect their ability to work. The share of low-income[b] non-elderly childless adults not receiving disability benefits who reported a disability or health issue that limits or precludes their ability to work was more than double the share for non-elderly childless adults at all income levels who don't receive disability benefits. Many of these individuals with low incomes "have physical or mental health conditions that hinder their ability to work but that do not meet the strict [disability] eligibility criteria for [SSI and Social Security], which require that applicants demonstrate that their disability will last at least 12 months or result in death and that it precludes them from engaging in substantial work" (Hingtgen, Saenz, and Zippel 2021, 4). Supporting this point, only about 40 percent of adults who reported a disability in Census data for 2014 received Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or SSI (Llobrera et al. 2021).

Poor non-elderly or disabled childless adults also are more likely to face barriers to sustained employment due to limited education. While in 2017, 34 percent of non-elderly or disabled childless adults overall had only a high school education or less, more than half of the non-elderly or disabled childless adults who were poor did—with nearly one in five lacking even a high school diploma. Similarly, while nearly 40 percent of non-elderly or disabled childless adults overall had at least a four-year college degree, only a little over 20 percent of those who were poor did (Hingtgen, Saenz, and Zippel 2021).

Finally, low-income childless adults who are employed tend to have low-paying jobs, which often have more volatility, irregular work schedules, or part-time hours, and are less likely to provide paid sick leave (Hingtgen, Saenz, and Zippel 2021).

a. Another 6 percent were Asian.
b. "Low income" refers here to income below 200 percent of the poverty line.

their total income, including income from government programs, below 50 percent of the poverty line.

In 2017, the safety net lifted out of deep poverty—i.e., from below the poverty line to between 50 and 100 percent of the poverty line or out of poverty altogether—76 percent of people of all ages who were in deep poverty before accounting for government taxes and transfers. The safety net lifted out of deep poverty 90 percent of otherwise-deeply-poor elderly adults, 78 percent of otherwise-deeply-poor children, and 69 percent of otherwise-deeply-poor non-elderly adults who were not receiving disability benefits and were raising children. But among non-elderly adults who were not raising children and not receiving disability benefits, the safety net lifted from deep poverty only 33 percent. In other words, two of every three non-elderly childless adults who were not receiving disability benefits and who were in deep poverty before accounting for government benefits remained in deep poverty after those benefits are taken into account (table 2; Trisi 2023a).

As a result, the percentage of people living in deep poverty in 2017, after accounting for government benefits, was twice as high among non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits (5.9 percent) as it was among the rest of the population (3 percent). Nearly half (49 percent) of all people

TABLE 2

Share of otherwise–deeply poor people lifted out of deep poverty by government programs, 1970 and 2017

	1970	2017
Total U.S. population	56%	76%
Children (under 18)	47%	78%
Non-elderly adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are raising children	37%	69%
Elderly adults (65 and over)	74%	90%
Non-elderly childless adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are not raising children	37%	33%

Source: Trisi 2023a.

Note: "Non-elderly adults not receiving disability benefits" refers to individuals aged 18–64 who do not receive SSI disability benefits or Social Security. See table 4 in this paper for a more comprehensive treatment of these data. People lifted out of deep poverty can be lifted to between 50 and 100 percent of the poverty line or out of poverty altogether.

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living in deep poverty in 2017 were non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits (Trisi 2023a).

Looked at another way, in 2017, 44 percent of the non-elderly childless adults who were not receiving disability benefits and were poor after accounting for government benefits lived in deep poverty. In contrast, 21 percent of others who were poor after accounting for government benefits lived in deep poverty.

A. Changes in antipoverty efficacy over the past half-century

The difference between what the safety net does for groups like children and elderly adults compared to what it does for non-elderly childless adults was not always this wide (see tables 1 and 2; see table 4 for more details). Over the past five decades or so, the antipoverty impact of government programs strengthened substantially for various groups, but not for non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits.

- **Children:** In 1970, taxes and transfers increased child poverty by 4 percent because the income and payroll taxes that low-income working families with children paid increased their poverty more than the government benefits they received reduced it. But by 1999, due to both benefit expansions and tax reductions, taxes and transfers reduced the number of children in poverty (and hence reduced the child poverty rate) by 23 percent. And by 2017, taxes and transfers reduced child poverty by 44 percent.

- **Elderly adults:** Taxes and transfers reduced the number of elderly adults who were poor by 37 percent in 1970 and by 69 percent in 2017.

- **Non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits**: This group, however, experienced virtually no improvement over this period. In 1970, taxes and transfers lifted from poverty only 7 percent of otherwise-poor non-elderly childless adults; in 1979, taxes and transfers lifted 9 percent; and in 2017, they lifted 8 percent.

The same historical patterns appear with respect to deep poverty.

- **Children:** The deep-poverty rate for children fell from 7.1 percent in 1970 to 2.9 percent in 2017. In 1970 the safety net lifted out of deep poverty fewer than half (47 percent) of otherwise–deeply poor children, but by 2017 it lifted 78 percent of otherwise–deeply poor children.

- **Elderly adults:** The share of elderly adults who live in deep poverty fell from 13.8 percent in 1970 to 4.1 percent in 2017, with the safety net in 1970 lifting out of deep poverty 74 percent of otherwise–deeply poor elderly adults, and in 2017 lifting out of deep poverty 90 percent of otherwise–deeply poor elderly adults.

- **Non-elderly childless adults not receiving disability benefits:** In contrast, the deep poverty rate for this group rose—from 4.8 percent in 1970 to 5.9 percent in 2017. And the share of otherwise–deeply poor non-elderly childless adults that the safety net lifts out of deep poverty fell, from 37 percent in 1970 to 33 percent in 2017.

These patterns are also reflected in the safety net's impact over time in narrowing the poverty gap—the total dollar amount by which the incomes of all who are poor fall below the poverty line. In 2017, the safety net shrank the poverty gap among poor elderly adults by 86 percent, up from 67 percent in 1970. For

TABLE 3

Share of the poverty gap eliminated by government programs, 1970 and 2017

	1970	2017
Total U.S. population	46%	68%
Children (under 18)	31%	67%
Non-elderly adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are raising children	19%	59%
Elderly adults (65 and over)	67%	86%
Non-elderly adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are not raising children	28%	23%

Source: Trisi 2023a.

Note: "Non-elderly adults not receiving disability benefits" refers to individuals aged 18-64 who do not receive SSI disability benefits or Social Security.

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children, it shrank the poverty gap by 67 percent in 2017, up from 31 percent in 1970.[4] But among non-elderly childless adults not receiving disability benefits, it shrank the poverty gap by only 23 percent in 2017—which was a decrease from the 28 percent reduction in the poverty gap in 1970 (table 3).

The safety net's antipoverty impact decreased even more markedly for non-elderly childless adults who are Latino. In 1970, government taxes and transfers lifted out of poverty 10 percent of non-elderly Latino childless adults not receiving disability benefits who would otherwise be poor. By 2017 that figure had fallen to just 2 percent. This decline may reflect in part the harsher restrictions of recent decades on the ability of certain groups of immigrants—mainly documented immigrants—to access various safety-net benefits. (Undocumented immigrants were already ineligible for nearly all benefits, other than those provided under a few child nutrition programs.)[5] In addition, it likely reflects changes over time in the composition of the Latino population, with the share of Latinos who are native born declining from 80 percent in 1970 to 66 percent in 2017, although that share hit its lowest point around the 1990s and has been edging up since. Pushing in the other direction, the share of non-native-born Latinos who are naturalized citizens—and thus more likely to qualify for various benefits—has more than doubled since 1994 (the first year for which those data are available), increasing from 17 to 37 percent over the 1994–2017 period. As a result, the overall share of Latinos who are U.S. citizens increased from 68 percent in 1994 to 78 percent in 2017. The 2017 percentage, however, was still below the share in 1970, when 80 percent of Latinos were native-born citizens; Census data on the share who were naturalized citizens in 1970 are not available.

B. Homelessness among non-elderly childless adults

The grim picture for childless adults also shows up in data on homelessness. Households consisting solely of adults comprised 71 percent of those who were homeless at a point in time in 2023, HUD estimates.[6] At least 91 percent of those adults were between the ages of 18 and 64 (HUD 2023a).[7]

Lower-income non-elderly households without children also are the likeliest households to be severely rent burdened, meaning that they pay more than half of their limited incomes for rent, HUD analyses find (HUD 2023b). Nearly half (46 percent) of non-elderly childless households with very low income (which HUD defines as income below 50 percent of median income for a household's geographic area, which generally is significantly above the poverty line) were severely rent burdened in 2019 (HUD 2023b), a figure that very likely is even higher today, given the overall increase in severe rent burdens since 2019 (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University [Joint Center] 2024; Airgood-Obrycki 2024).

The percentage of people who are severely rent burdened is even higher among non-elderly childless households who live below the poverty line. In 2022, data from the Joint Center show, 72 percent of renters with cash incomes below the poverty line were severely cost burdened, with these renters paying an average of 78 percent of their cash incomes for housing (Airgood-Obrycki 2024). These data are not broken out by household type, but the Joint Center has reported that "single-person households are the most likely to face housing cost burdens" (Joint Center 2022, 32).

TABLE 4

Poverty rates, and poverty reduction due to government programs, 1970 and 2017

	1970			2017		
	Poverty rate before taxes and transfers	Poverty rate after taxes and transfers	Share of otherwise-poor people lifted from poverty by taxes and transfers	Poverty rate before taxes and transfers	Poverty rate after taxes and transfers	Share of otherwise-poor people lifted from poverty by taxes and transfers
Total U.S. Population	25.7%	23.5%	9%	25.8%	14.0%	46%
Children (under 18)	26.6%	27.5%	–4%*	25.8%	14.3%	44%
Non-elderly adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are raising children	18.0%	19.9%	–11%*	18.3%	11.4%	38%
Elderly adults (65 and over)	66.1%	41.4%	37%	49.8%	15.3%	69%
Non-elderly childless adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are not raising children	14.3%	13.3%	7%	14.4%	13.3%	8%

Source: Trisi 2023a.

Note: "Non-elderly adults not receiving disability benefits" refers to individuals aged 18 to 64 who do not receive SSI disability benefits or Social Security. *A minus sign indicates that income and payroll taxes pushed more people in the group in question from above the poverty line to below it than social programs lifted from below the poverty line to above it. Hence, the net effect of taxes and transfers on this group was to increase the poverty rate rather than reduce it.

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C. Consistency with other studies

Other studies show comparable results.

- In a 2020 paper, David Brady and Zachary Parolin found that "deep/extreme poverty [defining deep poverty as below 20 percent, and extreme poverty as below 10 percent, of U.S. median income] has become increasingly concentrated among childless households" (2338). Their findings regarding extreme poverty are particularly striking: between 1993 and 2016, the share of households in extreme poverty remained stable for households with children but more than doubled for childless households. By 2016, extreme poverty was 3.6 times higher among childless households than among households with children.[8]

- Similarly, Parolin, Matthew Desmond, and Christopher Wimer (2023) found that, after adjusting for inflation, average tax-and-transfer benefits rose by 15 percent between 1973 and 2004 for households with children but fell by 47 percent for childless households. And, by 2019, they reported, "households with children received 2.8 times the mean level of transfers they received in 1967[,] . . . whereas households without children received less than their mean levels of transfers in 1967" (14). "Poor people who do not have dependent children," they observed, "experience a very different welfare regime than those who do" (24). They also noted, "This is especially concerning in light of the legacies of mass incarceration—which separates parents from children, can limit employment prospects after release, and has disproportionately affected low-education Black and Latino men" (24).

- In the same vein, Wimer and colleagues (2020) found dramatic differences between the safety net's treatment of non-elderly households with and without children (Wimer et al. 2020, 1847).

- Summarizing studies on these matters, Sarah Bruch, Joseph Van Der Naald, and Janet Gornick (2023) observed, "A consistent finding in this area is that households without children have experienced greater economic marginalization compared with households with children and have received considerably less antipoverty assistance over the past few decades" (273).

- Earlier analyses reached similarly somber conclusions. In 2015, for example, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported, "Childless households with no continuously employed members, headed by non-elderly people without disabilities, are generally ineligible for many benefits and have much higher rates of poverty than other demographic groups" (GAO 2015, 49).[9]

- Finally, in a new paper to be released at the same time as this paper, Janet Gornick and colleagues (2024) find—using the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) database and a relative measure of poverty—that the poverty rate among U.S. childless non-disabled adults aged 25 to 59 rose a little over 2 percentage points between the late 1990s and 2019. That is similar to the 2.3-percentage-point poverty-rate increase that the data Trisi (2023a) analyzed for this paper (using the SPM) show for non-elderly or disabled childless adults aged 18 to 64 between 1999 and 2017.

II. Gaps in the safety net

The safety net for poor non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits has substantial gaps that have grown larger in some respects in recent decades.

A. Cash assistance through federal programs

The federal government neither operates nor funds any basic cash assistance program for poor (or even extremely poor) individuals in this group. Social Security is by far the nation's strongest cash assistance program. But individuals who are not at least 62, sufficiently disabled to meet the stringent tests for Social Security Disability Insurance, or who do not have a spouse or child eligible for Social Security survivors' benefits do not qualify. Similarly, poor individuals must be at least 65 or meet stringent disability criteria to qualify for SSI.

The federal government contributes funding for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which states operate, and which provides cash assistance for some very poor families with children; that assistance is generally quite limited, however, and has shrunk considerably in recent decades in inflation-adjusted terms, reaching only a fraction of those who qualify. The federal government also provides significant cash benefits to millions of lower-income working families with children through the EITC, though families with the lowest earnings receive the smallest benefits and families without earnings are ineligible. But for non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits, no federal or federally supported cash assistance is generally available regardless of how poor they might be—except for very limited benefits for some who are employed through the EITC's childless workers' component and time-limited UI for a small percentage of those who are jobless.

The EITC for childless workers is very limited. The average annual benefit in 2020 was only $295, which is less than $25 a month. That was less than one-tenth the average EITC benefit of $3,099 for families with children that same year (CBPP 2023). Furthermore, the EITC for childless workers begins to phase down at very low levels of earnings; in 2023 it began phasing down when a worker's earnings topped $9,800—just 67 percent of the poverty line for a one-person household, and thousands of dollars below what a full-time job at the federal minimum wage of $7.25 an hour pays. In addition, childless workers under age 25 are entirely ineligible for the childless workers' EITC. All told, childless workers receive fewer than 4 percent of the EITC's overall benefits (Congressional Research Service [CRS] 2023).

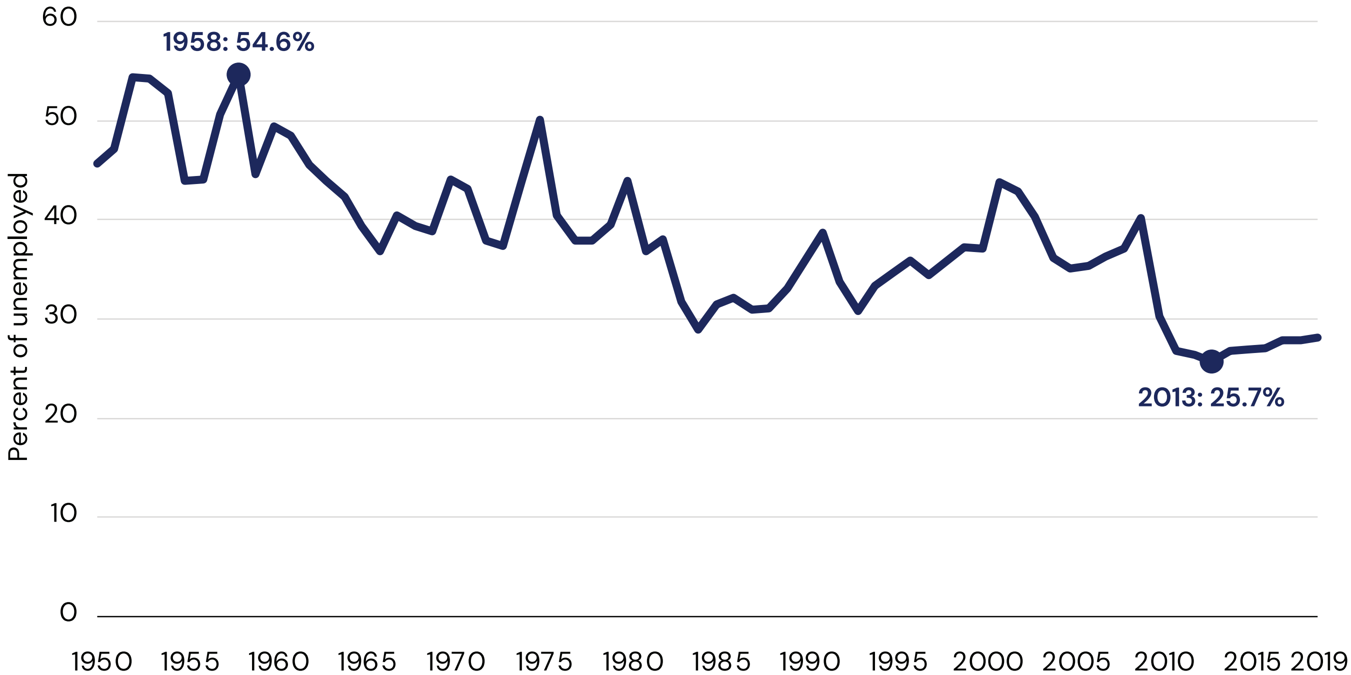
Moreover, the EITC for childless workers is too small to offset the federal payroll taxes (and in some cases income taxes) that many low-income childless workers must pay. As a result, as noted above, the federal tax code taxes more than 5 million childless workers into, or deeper into, poverty each year (Marr 2023)—and childless adults are the sole group for which this is so. (The 2021 American Rescue Plan significantly expanded the childless workers' EITC for 2021, raising its phase-in rate, maximum credit, and phase-out levels, and making most low-income childless workers aged 19 to 24 eligible. But those expansions expired at the end of 2021.)

UI also provides only limited assistance to this group. UI has eroded in recent decades for unemployed workers overall. From 2011 through 2019, only 27 percent of all unemployed workers—not just non-elderly or disabled childless adults—received UI benefits in an average month, and the percentage fell further to 25 percent in 2022, a historic low (U.S Department of Labor [DOL] 2024; see figure 1). In the 1950s, by contrast, roughly half of the unemployed received UI benefits in an average month; in the 1970s, about 40 percent of them did (DOL n.d.; Wandner and Stettner 2000).

Low-income workers, including those who are not childless adults, fare particularly poorly on this front. "Although low-wage workers were almost two-and-one-half times as likely to be out of work as higher-wage workers, they were about half as likely to receive UI benefits," the GAO reported in a 2007 analysis (GAO 2007, 3). This was true, the GAO noted, even when job

FIGURE 1

Percent of unemployed receiving unemployment insurance benefits (1950–2019)



Source: U.S. Department of Labor 2024.

Note: Values are annual averages using quarterly data. In 2020, the recipiency rate jumped to 78.0%, a historical anomaly. In 2022, the latest year for which data are available, the rate fell to 25.1%, an all-time low.

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tenure was similar for both groups of unemployed workers. Similarly, another analysis reported that, outside of recessions, "most low-paid workers do not qualify for unemployment benefits when they lose their jobs because of a host of restrictive eligibility criteria" (Hingtgen, Saenz, and Zippel 2021, 2). Unlike programs such as Social Security and Medicare that feature targeting within universalism—i.e., their benefit structures favor those with lower incomes—low-income workers who lose their jobs generally fare worse under UI than more-affluent workers who lose theirs (Greenstein 2022).[10]

In addition, Black unemployed workers fare worse under UI than other unemployed workers: only 23 percent of the former received UI benefits in 2019, compared to 28 percent of unemployed workers overall (O'Leary, Spriggs, and Wandner 2022). States in which the Black share of the population is higher tend to provide fewer weeks of benefits or impose more-intensive eligibility restrictions, studies also show (Ganong et al. 2022; Wandner 2023). For low-income unemployed childless adults, a group that consists disproportionately of Black people or other people of color (Trisi 2023a), problems in accessing UI thus can be acute.

These problems have grown more pronounced over time. Federal policymakers scaled back UI in the early 1980s when they shrank its Extended Benefits program for the long-term unemployed and imposed interest charges on the loans many states take from the federal UI trust fund during recessions, creating a fiscal incentive for states to pare back UI eligibility or benefits (Committee on Ways and Means 1993; Greenstein 2022). In addition, since the Great Recession some states have reduced the number of weeks of benefits for unemployed workers, added more eligibility restrictions, or done both (Congdon and Vroman 2021; von Wachter 2019), a matter to which this paper returns in section III.

B. State cash assistance

Through the 1980s, very poor non-elderly childless adults could receive cash assistance in most states through state-run and state-financed GA programs or, in some cases, through local GA programs. But, over the past 35 years, states have scaled back these programs sharply or eliminated them altogether.

In 1989, 38 states had GA programs. By 2020, only 24 states and the District of Columbia still did. Even states like Illinois, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, which do not tend to be highly restrictive with respect to social programs, eliminated their GA programs altogether.[11] Moreover, most states that still have a program cut it back, often severely. By 2020, only 11 of the 24 states and the District of Columbia that still operated programs provided any benefits to people who did not meet a disability or incapacity test. By the end of 2019, fewer than 500,000 individuals nationwide were receiving GA benefits (Llobrera et al. 2021).

In addition, almost all states that still have a GA program have cut benefits in inflation-adjusted terms. By 2020, the maximum GA benefit was below half of the poverty line in all but two of the states that still had GA programs and below a quarter of the poverty line in half of them. In nearly all these states, GA benefit levels are not indexed to inflation, so they erode further in real terms with each passing year.

For example, in Delaware, which is not considered to be a "red" state and is not known for highly austere social-program policies, the maximum GA benefit in 2020 was $79 a month, and only adults considered unable to work or who were over age 55 could qualify. In the "blue" state of Maryland, the maximum GA benefit was $185 a month and was limited to working-age adults deemed unable to work due to physical or mental incapacity. Some states or localities also impose severe time limits on the modest benefits they provide, such as limiting benefits to one month out of a year in some Iowa counties, 12 months out of five years in Utah, and five years out of a lifetime in New Jersey (Llobrera et al. 2021; Schott 2020).

To be sure, while many states were cutting or eliminating their GA programs in recent decades, some states were creating state EITCs for low-income working households, supplementing the federal EITC. Four decades ago, virtually no state had an EITC of its own (Bogdanos 2019). As of the start of 2024, 31 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico had state EITCs (NCSL 2023), which are refundable (and hence available to workers who do not earn enough to owe state income tax) in all but four of these states, and which go to both childless workers and working families with children in all but one of these states (Butkus 2023; Urban Institute 2023; Waxman and Hinh 2023). In most states, however, the state credit equals a specified percentage of the federal credit that a worker can receive—usually 40 percent or less—so the benefits that state EITCs provide to poor childless workers generally are extremely small. (Williams, Waxman, and Legendre 2020). As noted, the average federal EITC for childless workers was only $295 in 2020.

C. In-kind benefits: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Before the GA cuts of recent decades, poor non-elderly childless adults who did not receive disability benefits could, in most states, receive a combination of GA and SNAP benefits. Prior to 1996, childless adults were subject to the same SNAP eligibility criteria as other low-income households. But, as states ended or substantially shrank their GA programs over recent decades, federal policymakers also sharply curtailed SNAP eligibility for low-income non-elderly childless adults.

The 1996 welfare law imposed a severe time limit on SNAP benefits for people aged 18 to 49 who do not have dependents and are not considered disabled or incapacitated and thus unable to work. Since the law's enactment, SNAP eligibility for this group has been limited to three months in which they are not employed for at least 20 hours a week out of each three-year period. Participation for at least 20 hours a week in a qualifying work or training program meets this requirement, but most states do not operate such programs for these individuals or make slots in such programs broadly available to them. In addition, job search does not count as a work activity. Individuals who search assiduously for a job but cannot obtain one lose their benefits after three months, no matter how many hours of job search they have conducted.

To be sure, states can secure waivers of these severe restrictions for the state as a whole or areas within it during periods when the state or such areas experience elevated unemployment; in addition, states have a limited number of exemptions they can use to shield a modest number of these individuals from the restrictions. Federal policymakers also have suspended these restrictions during the last two recessions. But the restrictions have reduced benefit receipt substantially among this population (Gray et al. 2023, Feng 2021), and those affected are very poor. Their average monthly cash income equals only 32 percent of the poverty line (Bolen 2023), in large part because they qualify for so little other assistance.

Harsh as these provisions are, various members of Congress nevertheless have sought to make them harsher. The June 2023 budget agreement between President Biden and House Republican leaders (negotiated to raise the debt limit) added low-income childless adults between the ages of 50 and 54 to those subject to SNAP's three-month limit. The budget agreement also provided exemptions from the three-month limit, however, for veterans, adults under 25 who have aged out of foster care, and people of all ages who are currently homeless.

Proponents of the three-month limit defend it as a work requirement that prompts more jobless adults to search for and find jobs. Yet researchers have found little evidence that it has significantly raised employment (Gray et al. 2023; U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] 2021). Some, in fact, question whether to even think of it as a work requirement. In a 2021 analysis, a CBPP research team observed, "Because this provision denies basic food assistance to people who want to work and will accept any job or work program slot that is offered, it is effectively a harsh time limit rather than a work requirement as such requirements are commonly understood. Work requirements in economic support programs typically require people to look for work and accept any job or employment program slot that's offered. But they do not cut off people who are willing to work and looking for a job simply because they can't find one. And SNAP itself has separate work requirement authority of that nature for other categories of SNAP participants, under which states can require individuals to participate in job search or a training program but can't terminate them if no program slot is available" (Llobrera et al. 2021, 40).

D. Rental assistance

Non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits are eligible for, but are underserved by, federal rental assistance programs. More than 7 million low-income adults aged 18 to 61 who do not live with minor children are severely rent burdened, meaning that they pay more than half of their limited income for rent (Llobrera et al. 2021). And, as noted earlier, non-elderly childless adults comprise the overwhelming share of people who experience homelessness.

Federal rental assistance programs are not entitlements, so they can serve only as many eligible low-income households as the funding that Congress and the president provide in annual appropriations bills will allow. Some of the limited rental assistance available is targeted to elderly people, people with disabilities, and veterans. For people not in these categories, waiting lists for rental assistance can be years long. Indeed, some public housing authorities (PHAs, which run the rental assistance programs at the local level) have closed their waiting lists altogether because of the lists' excessive length (Acosta and Gartland 2021).

That is particularly problematic for poor non-elderly childless adults or who are not considered to have a serious disability: PHAs often put them at the bottom of their waiting lists. Some 80 percent of low-income renter households headed by non-elderly childless adults that are eligible for rental assistance do not receive it.

Compounding this problem, the supply of low-cost rental housing is shrinking. It "has fallen precipitously in the past decade," the Joint Center recently reported (Joint Center 2023a, 3), "leaving renters with lower incomes with even fewer affordable places to live. . .. The market has lost 3.9 million units with contract rents below $600 [adjusted for inflation] in the last decade, and the loss has been accelerating" (Joint Center 2023b, 36).[12]

E. Health insurance

Unlike cash assistance, SNAP, and rental assistance, the safety net has grown stronger in most states in providing health insurance for non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits. The 2010 ACA sought to make poor and near-poor adults who are not in families with children and are not elderly, pregnant, or receiving disability benefits—a group that was ineligible for Medicaid in most cases—eligible for the program starting in 2014. The ACA also provided subsidies to help people with incomes between 138 and 400 percent of the poverty line afford private health coverage through the ACA's health insurance marketplaces.

In 2012, however, the Supreme Court struck down the ACA requirement that states extend Medicaid coverage to most adults below 138 percent of the poverty line who do not otherwise qualify for the program, making the Medicaid expansion a state option instead. With the federal government covering 100 percent of expansion costs for 2014–16 and 90 percent thereafter, most states adopted the expansion.

But, as of early 2024, 10 states still have not done so. In nine of them—Alabama, Florida, Georgia,[13] Kansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming—most non-elderly childless adults who are not considered to be disabled remain ineligible for Medicaid or any other public health insurance. (The tenth state, Wisconsin, covers non-elderly childless adults with incomes below the poverty line through its Badger Care section 1115 waiver; Sharer 2023.) Medicaid enrollment would increase by 5 million people if all remaining states adopted the expansion, the Urban Institute estimates, with (1) 2.3 million uninsured individuals gaining coverage, (2) another 2.3 million people with incomes between 100 percent and 138 percent of the poverty line switching from the ACA marketplaces to Medicaid—which has lower cost-sharing charges than marketplace coverage and does not impose deductibles, and (3) another 500,000 people switching from employer-based coverage to Medicaid (Buettgens and Ramchandani 2023).

III. Strengthening supports for these individuals

The federal government and the states can take steps to strengthen support for low-income non-elderly childless adults, and so reduce poverty, hardship, homelessness, and uninsurance, as the menu of policy options below indicates. What is lacking are both a focus on this group and the political will to aid it.

A. Strengthening federal and state earned income tax credits

Basic federal cash assistance for poor non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits—including adults who do not have earnings—lacks political support and is hard to envision in the foreseeable future. But more modest cash assistance measures may be achievable.

Such actions include substantially strengthening the very small federal EITC for low-income childless workers. As noted, the EITC provides very small benefits to this group, and the benefits begin phasing out when an individual's income reaches just 67 percent of the poverty line. Moreover, workers under 25 (and childless workers 65 and over) are ineligible. Proposals to bolster the very small EITC for childless workers have been part of policy discussions for the past quarter-century, starting with President Clinton's final budgets. Hopes for progress rose when President Obama and House Speaker Paul Ryan proposed similar expansions of the childless workers' EITC, but Ryan's proposal lacked support among House Republicans, and it did not advance.

This effort gained new impetus in 2021 when the American Rescue Plan (ARP) included a substantial expansion of the childless workers' EITC, although it was for 2021 only. The ARP tripled the maximum credit for childless workers and made most childless adults aged 19 to 24 eligible for that credit (Waxman 2022).[14] House Democrats subsequently sought to extend this EITC expansion, passing such a measure in November 2021 as part of their Build Back Better bill. But that legislation foundered in the Senate, mainly due to opposition from West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin. In his most recent budgets, President Biden has proposed resurrecting the ARP's EITC expansion and making it permanent, but the proposal has not made any progress on Capitol Hill.

Nevertheless, this proposal remains a part of policy debates. When there next is a Democratic trifecta (i.e., simultaneous Democratic control of the White House, Senate, and House), lawmakers could try to revive and enact such a measure. Even in the absence of a Democratic trifecta (and thus with more-limited aspirations), congressional proponents of a stronger childless workers' EITC might be able to secure improvements in it as part of negotiations on future tax bills, such as the tax bills generally enacted every few years to extend business and other tax breaks that are scheduled to expire.

Strengthening state EITCs for childless workers also holds promise. As noted, as of the start of 2024, 31 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico had state EITCs, with most of them refundable and all but one (Wisconsin's) covering childless workers as well as families with children (Butkus 2023; Waxman 2022; Williams, Waxman, and Legendre 2020).

In most of these states, the state EITC for eligible workers equals a specified percentage of the worker's federal EITC—usually 40 percent or less; because the federal EITC for childless workers is so small, state EITCs for childless workers tend to be miniscule. Nevertheless, Maryland and the District of Columbia provide EITCs to childless workers that equal 100 percent of their federal credit while providing EITCs to workers with children that equal 45 percent, and 70 percent, respectively, of their federal credit. Maine also provides a higher percentage of the federal EITC to childless workers than it provides to workers with children (Butkus 2023; Urban Institute 2023; Waxman and Hinh 2023; NCSL 2023).

In addition, while childless workers below age 25 are ineligible for the federal EITC, eight states—California, Colorado, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, and New Mexico—make childless workers under 25 eligible for their state EITCs (Hinh and Waxman 2022; Williams, Waxman, and Legendre 2020).[15] Finally, while the federal EITC is limited to people with Social Security numbers, 10 states and the District of Columbia provide their state EITCs to immigrant workers who file tax returns using Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs); the IRS provides ITINs to such workers to enable and encourage them to file tax returns (Butkus 2023; Waxman and Hinh 2023; Leachman 2023).

State policymakers who seek to strengthen support for poor childless workers could follow the paths described above: (1) by providing a higher percentage of the federal EITC to childless workers than to families with children, given how tiny the federal EITC is for childless workers; (2) extending the credit to childless workers who are under 25 or over 65; and (3) where the politics allow, permitting workers who file tax returns with ITINs to qualify for the state's EITC.

In addition, two localities—Montgomery County, Maryland, and New York City—offer local refundable EITCs that cover both families with children and childless workers. Montgomery County provides an EITC for childless workers equal to up to 56 percent of their federal EITC. New York City provides an EITC to this group of 10 to 30 percent of a worker's federal EITC, with the highest percentage going to households with the lowest incomes (Das, Boardman, and Hendricks 2023). Other localities could consider such measures.

B. Minimum wage improvements

Both the federal and state governments also could strengthen their minimum wages. Strengthened minimum wages reduce poverty, including among the childless adult population, as Gornick and her colleagues (2024) show.

Policymakers have not increased the federal minimum wage of $7.25 an hour since 2009. It has shrunk in inflation-adjusted terms by 30 percent since then—and by 42 percent since 1968, the year that the federal minimum wage reached its peak in purchasing power (Payne-Patterson and Maye 2023). A number of states and localities have taken steps to address this erosion: 30 states, the District of Columbia, and nearly 50 cities and counties now have minimum wages higher than the federal wage (Cooper, Hickey, and Zipperer 2022; DOL n.d.). Federal, state, and local actions in this area would reduce both pre-tax and transfer poverty and post-tax and transfer poverty among low-paid workers generally, including low-wage workers who are childless adults. Gornick and her colleagues (2024) also show that increasing the share of the labor force that is unionized and covered by collective bargaining agreements is another factor associated with reduced poverty.

C. General assistance

States could reinvigorate and strengthen their GA programs. To be sure, that will not likely be politically viable in most states, and advocates have not focused much attention in recent years on improving GA. But, in the past several years, some "blue" states have enacted safety-net improvements that were previously considered politically unlikely, such as the childless workers' EITC expansions noted above in Maryland and the District of Columbia.

Strengthening GA might be possible in some liberal jurisdictions. Minnesota, for example, enacted legislation in 2023 that, for the first time, tied its GA benefit level for single adults to the benefit level the state provides to a pregnant woman under its TANF program. That raised the state's GA benefit from $203 to $350 a month. In addition, the benefit now comes with annual cost-of-living adjustments (Pavetti 2023). While this increase did not fully offset the erosion of Minnesota's GA benefit level in inflation-adjusted terms over the previous decades, it nonetheless produced a striking 72 percent benefit increase.

D. Unemployment insurance, Jobseekers Allowance

Policymakers could bolster UI, which is important for strengthening the U.S. safety net overall. The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program that was in place during the COVID-driven recession broadened UI eligibility for low-income, part-time, intermittent, and other such workers, making many more poor childless adults eligible for benefits. The federal government could direct states to broaden UI eligibility in ways like these on an ongoing basis and give states federal funding to do so, although that seems politically unlikely outside of recessions. Alternatively, the federal government could provide stronger financial incentives for states to institute such reforms.

Federal lawmakers have developed various proposals to strengthen UI in ways that would benefit jobless childless adults as well as others who are out of work. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden, Sen. Michael Bennet, and Rep. Don Beyer, for example, introduced far-reaching UI legislation in October 2023 that would cover many more workers who lose their jobs and establish national minimum standards for UI benefit size and duration (House.gov 2023).[16]

Among its reforms, the legislation would establish a Jobseekers Allowance, providing a federally financed, $250 weekly benefit, indexed to inflation, to unemployed workers 19 or older who are actively seeking work but are not covered by UI or qualify for only very small UI benefits. An unemployed worker could receive this allowance for up to 26 weeks. That could reduce poverty markedly for substantial numbers of childless workers as well as for others who are out of work.

E. Jobs with income

To strengthen support for destitute childless adults, policymakers also could resuscitate and broaden a federal policy intervention in effect in 2009–10 in response to the Great Recession. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Recovery Act) established a $5 billion emergency fund connected to TANF that states could use to, among other purposes, establish subsidized jobs of specified durations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors for needy parents and out-of-work youths. Some 39 states and the District of Columbia implemented such subsidized jobs programs, which employed about 260,000 individuals before the funding expired and the programs ended (Pavetti 2011).

The subsidized jobs initiative proved popular with governors of both parties. Policymakers could consider resurrecting this type of jobs program and broadening eligibility to include childless adults beyond youths.

F. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

SNAP's major eligibility restrictions for childless adults aged 18 to 54 are another possible area for reform. As noted, between the creation of the Food Stamp program (since renamed SNAP) in the 1960s and enactment of the 1996 welfare law, childless adults faced the same work requirements as other SNAP participants. If jobless, they had to register for work, engage in work activities as required such as a job search, accept jobs offered, and not quit a job without good cause. The 1996 welfare law, however, sharply altered these rules by limiting SNAP eligibility for childless adults aged 18 to 49 who are considered physically able to work to three months while they are out of work or working less than 20 hours a week out of every three years, unless they are enrolled in a qualified work or training program, which most states do not operate for these individuals. Job search is not an allowable activity, and poor childless adults who search for a job but do not obtain one are among those who lose SNAP benefits after three months. States can request waivers from these rules for areas with elevated unemployment and can exempt a limited number of individuals from the three-month cutoff, but large numbers of people—many with extremely low incomes and who are living in deep poverty—are subject to these austere rules and thus receive little food assistance. As noted, the budget agreement of June 2023 to raise the debt limit added childless adults aged 50 to 54 to those who are subject to these rules, while exempting veterans, people under 25 who have aged out of foster care, and homeless individuals.

Federal policymakers have multiple ways to ease these requirements and the hardships they cause. They could reinstate the pre-1996 policy landscape under which childless adults faced the same work requirements as other SNAP households, though such a change seems politically unlikely for the foreseeable future. They could change the 3-out-of-36-months rule to a 6-out-of-12 months or 4-out-of-12 months rule, as then-Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Richard Lugar tried to do in the 1990s. They could retain the three-month limit but require that, to apply it, a state must offer a work or training program slot to everyone who does not find a job or a work or training slot on their own (Llobrera et al. 2021). They also could allow a broader set of work activities—including a job search—to count toward the 20-hours-a-week threshold, ensuring that people who search but cannot find jobs do not lose basic food assistance.

State policymakers also could take action. States not requesting waivers of these requirements for areas that qualify for them, or not using exemptions from the requirements that their state has been allotted, could do so. States also could provide slots in job training or other jobs programs for more of these individuals.[17]

G. Rental assistance

As noted, rental assistance programs are not entitlements. When a program has entitlement status, all eligible people who apply for it must be served. But non-entitlement programs, which lawmakers fund each year through the congressional appropriations process, can serve only as many eligible people as the appropriated funds will allow. Other eligible people who apply are placed on waiting lists or simply turned away.

The problem is especially acute with rental assistance for poor childless adults who are not elderly or receiving disability benefits. Local PHAs that administer federal rental assistance programs can establish priorities for distributing the limited rental assistance available among different groups of eligible households. PHAs generally prioritize groups such as elderly adults and people with severe disabilities, and they typically put non-elderly childless adults who are not classified as disabled far down the priority ladder. Fewer than one in five eligible low-income non-elderly childless adults receives such rental aid, and the share is even lower among childless adults who are not classified as disabled. This and the greater incidence of homelessness among this population suggest that strengthening rental assistance should be one of the highest priorities for aiding this group.

To help address the problem, federal policymakers should boost funds for rental assistance substantially. A Bipartisan Policy Center commission (BPC 2013) urged policymakers to make rental assistance an entitlement for extremely low-income renter households, i.e., those with incomes below 30 percent of median income in their local area. But that idea went nowhere in Congress. And with lawmakers squeezing non-entitlement funding outside of defense, veterans, and homeland security programs year after year, securing substantially more funding for rental assistance faces daunting obstacles, at least in the near term. President Biden has proposed substantial funding increases for rental assistance in his annual budgets, but those proposals, too, have died on Capitol Hill.

Inaction at the federal level, coupled with the growing shortage of affordable housing, also argues for efforts to persuade states, which historically have done little in providing low-income rental assistance, to start playing a larger role.

All told, with the shortage of affordable housing continuing to grow and rental assistance in such short supply, stronger action that includes providing more resources for rental assistance almost certainly will be needed at both federal and state levels.

H. Health coverage

More than 2 million uninsured non-elderly or disabled childless adults live in the 10 states that have not adopted the ACA's Medicaid expansion, leaving these individuals without the Medicaid coverage they would have if their states were to reverse course. Closing this coverage gap is another priority for improving the living conditions of this population.

Under the ACA, states have had strong financial incentives to adopt the Medicaid expansion. The federal government covered 100 percent of expansion costs for 2014–16 and has covered 90 percent thereafter, a much higher share than the 50 to 78 percent of health care costs the federal government pays for other Medicaid enrollees, depending on the state. In addition, states that newly adopt the expansion now receive a 5-percentge-point increase in the share of Medicaid costs the federal government pays for other Medicaid enrollees in the state for the first two years the expansion is in effect.

Absent action by these 10 states, the federal government could take steps to close this coverage gap itself. Policymakers developed two promising strategies for federal action in 2021 and 2022, although Congress did not adopt them: First, the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) could institute and operate the Medicaid expansion in these states. Or, second, the federal government could extend the subsidized health coverage offered in these 10 states through the ACA's marketplaces to people below the poverty line who would qualify for Medicaid if their state adopted the expansion, while modifying marketplace coverage for these people to make it more Medicaid-like (Fiedler 2023). The House approved the second of these approaches in its Build Back Better legislation of late 2021, and President Biden's most-recent budgets include such a measure,[18] but it has advanced no further on Capitol Hill. It remains a prime candidate for enactment when Democrats next have a trifecta in Washington.

Matthew Fiedler (2023) has explained that each of the two approaches has advantages and disadvantages relative to the other but that both would have broadly similar effects and would "ensure that people with incomes below 138 percent of the FPL [federal poverty line] are eligible for zero- (or near-zero) premium coverage that covers a broad set of services with minimal cost-sharing; as such, either would largely or entirely fill the gaps left by state decisions not to expand Medicaid."[19]

I. Other services

Non-elderly childless adults without disabilities also could benefit if policymakers increased the availability and effectiveness of various services. These particularly include job training services—including services to help people whose disabilities are not severe enough for them to receive SSI or Social Security to participate successfully in the workforce—as well as mental health services, services to address addiction, and services to help formerly incarcerated people enter and remain in the workforce, among others.

Conclusion

Although the U.S. safety net has grown stronger in recent decades (particularly for elderly people and children), it remains considerably weaker than that of most other Western developed nations—and is at its weakest in how it treats non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits. The safety net lifts out of poverty a much smaller share of otherwise-poor non-elderly childless adults not receiving disability benefits than the share it lifts out of children, elderly people, and people who do receive disability benefits. As a result, nearly one of every two people in the United States who lives in deep poverty is a non-elderly childless adult who does not receive disability benefits. So are most people in the country who are homeless.

Policymakers at both federal and state levels would do well to pay increased attention to this group of impoverished individuals and find ways to lessen their destitution and improve their opportunities.

Appendix A. The methodology of this poverty analysis, by Danilo Trisi

We created the poverty series used here by merging data files from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) with historical Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) data produced by Columbia University's Center on Poverty and Social Policy.[20] We use the Census Bureau's SPM data when available starting in

2009 and the Columbia SPM data for prior years. This analysis ends in 2017 because changes in the Census's survey methods make 2018 data and later not strictly comparable to earlier data.[21]

Our poverty series uses 2021 SPM thresholds adjusted back for inflation, which were the latest available when we started the data work for this report. This means that poverty is defined as having family resources below the SPM poverty thresholds established by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) for 2021, adjusted in earlier years for inflation using the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) consumer price index retroactive series. Thresholds are also adjusted for family size and composition, home ownership status, and local housing costs. In 2021 this threshold was $31,453 for a two-adult/two-child family renting in an average-cost community.

Using a recent year's SPM threshold and adjusting it back for inflation creates an anchored SPM series (Wimer et al. 2013).[22] In making historical comparisons, many analysts prefer the anchored SPM to the standard or relative SPM, which allows thresholds to grow slightly faster than inflation as living standards rise across decades. For this analysis, we used an anchored series to ensure that the trends we find are purely due to changes in families' resources, and not to changes in the poverty thresholds, in accordance with this report's focus on the evolving role of government assistance. As Christopher Wimer and colleagues have observed, an "advantage of an anchored SPM (or any absolute poverty measure, for that matter) is that poverty trends resulting from such a measure can be explained by changes in income and net transfer payments (cash or in kind). Trends in poverty based on a relative measure[,] . . . on the other hand, could be due to over time changes in thresholds. Thus, an anchored SPM arguably provides a cleaner measure of how changes in income and net transfer payments have affected poverty historically" (Wimer et al. 2013, 3). The Census Bureau's official poverty measure also uses thresholds that are adjusted each year only for inflation.[23]

Census counts of participants in various social programs typically fall well short of the totals shown in actual administrative records. Such underreporting is common in household surveys and can affect estimates of poverty. The extent of underreporting can vary by program and by year. We correct for the underreporting of income from three government assistance programs: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The corrections come from the Transfer Income Model (TRIM) policy micro-simulation model developed by the Urban Institute with primary funding from the U.S Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE).

TRIM starts with Census survey data but adjusts those data to more closely match actual numbers and characteristics of benefit recipients shown in program records. We make these corrections starting in 1993, when these data became available. While these adjustments are not available for 1970 and 1979, they would have made less of a difference at that time because government antipoverty efforts were smaller. Further evidence that such adjustments, if possible, would have less impact on the data for 1970 and 1979 comes from the fact that the underreporting of program receipt in the Census data was significantly smaller in earlier decades and has increased markedly over the period for which TRIM adjustments are available, particularly for SNAP. In 1993 the CPS captured about two-thirds of SNAP benefits, and in 2017, it captured only about half.

Our calculations of the effect of government assistance and taxes include Social Security, unemployment insurance (UI), workers' compensation insurance, veterans' benefits, TANF, state general assistance (GA), SSI, SNAP, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), rental assistance such as Section 8 and public housing, low-income home energy assistance, the EITC, and the Child Tax Credit (CTC). Benefit figures for 2008–10 also reflect several temporary federal benefits enacted in response to the Great Recession: a 2008 stimulus payment, a 2009 economic recovery payment, and the 2009–10 Making Work Pay tax credit. Taxes, which are subtracted from family resources, are family members' federal and state income and payroll taxes.

We define non-elderly childless adults as individuals aged 18 to 64 with no children in their SPM family unit. Note that, based on this definition, non-elderly childless adults could still live in a household that includes children who are not members of their family, or they could be supporting their own children who live in a different household. To limit the overall population of non-elderly childless adults to those who are not receiving disability income, we further restrict it to individuals with no personal income from Social Security or SSI. We exclude all Social Security participants, and not just SSDI participants, because the CPS did not ask for the reason for receiving Social Security in the early years of our analysis.[24]

This report uses the term "Latino" to refer to people of any race who identify as Hispanic or Latino in

Census surveys. The racial and ethnic categories used in this report are mutually exclusive. Individuals can be classified as white only, not Latino; Black only, not Latino; Latino (any race); Asian only, not Latino; or another race or multiracial, not Latino.

Endnotes

1. We define "non-elderly adults who are not raising children" and "non-elderly childless adults"—terms we use interchangeably—as individuals aged 18 to 64 with no children in their Census Bureau family unit. Non-elderly childless adults could live in a household that includes children who are not members of their family or could have children who live in a different household.
2. The safety net is stronger for non-elderly adults who receive SSI disability benefits or Social Security. In 2017, taxes and transfers lifted out of poverty 60 percent of those in this group who would otherwise be poor, including 59 percent of the otherwise-poor in this group who were not raising children and 63 percent of the otherwise-poor in the group who were raising children.
3. The term "Latino" in this paper refers to people of any race who identify as Hispanic or Latino in Census surveys.
4. In 1970, the Census data used here show, taxes and transfers slightly increased the child poverty rate while reducing the child poverty gap. This suggests that, for most children receiving safety-net benefits, the benefits in 1970 made them less poor but did not raise them above the poverty line, while taxes moved some families with children from modestly above to modestly below the poverty line.
5. In low-income households in which children who are U.S. citizens live with undocumented parents, the citizen children may qualify for other benefits that can bring some support into the family, but that is not the case for undocumented low-income childless adults.
6. These HUD figures include both what HUD refers to as "unsheltered homelessness" and "sheltered homelessness."
7. HUD data for 2019 also show that 91 percent of those experiencing chronic homelessness and 93 percent of those experiencing unsheltered homelessness were individuals not living with minor children. These numbers include elderly adults (65 and over) and unaccompanied children (18 and below) (Llobrera et al. 2021).
8. These calculations define extreme poverty as below 10 percent of national median income.
9. This statement from the GAO report refers to the poverty rate for childless-adult households headed by non-elderly adults who have no continuously employed members. This differs from the overall poverty rate discussed in section I of this paper for non-elderly childless adults who do not receive disability benefits, which includes people who are continuously employed.
10. "During the Great Recession," Manuel Kovalski and Louise Sheiner (2020) report, "only one-quarter of low-wage workers—defined as those who earned less than their state's 30th percentile wage—received UI benefits when they became unemployed. Workers who earned more than the 30th percentile wage before becoming unemployed were twice as likely to receive UI benefits."
11. In four states without state GA programs, one or more counties offer local GA programs (Schott 2020).
12. Lawmakers often fund a modest number of new rental vouchers in annual appropriations bills, targeted in whole or in part to groups such as people with disabilities and homeless veterans. Their positive effect on the overall supply of affordable housing is often offset, or more than offset, however, by the loss of some public housing units and other affordable units due to their deterioration over time or their conversion to market housing (Llobrera et al. 2021).
13. This paper follows the practice of other analyses in categorizing Georgia as a state that has not adopted the Medicaid expansion. Georgia instituted a very small Medicaid expansion for non-elderly childless adults who are not considered disabled on July 1, 2023, through a Section 1115 Medicaid waiver. Coverage under the waiver is limited, however, to people below 100 percent of the poverty line who meet a stringent monthly reporting requirement and show that they are completing at least 80 hours of qualifying work activities every month. The state's waiver application estimates that only 25,000 people will be enrolled in the waiver's first year of operation and only about 53,000 by the fifth year (Sharer 2023). Georgia's experience with the waiver to date suggests these estimates are considerably too high; in the waiver program's first five and a half months of operation, it enrolled only 2,344 people (Messerly 2024). In contrast, the Urban Institute estimates that Georgia's adoption of the ACA Medicaid expansion would bring 448,000 Georgians onto Medicaid (Sharer 2023).
14. The ARP also made childless workers aged 65 and over eligible for the childless workers' EITC and raised the income level at which the credit phases out.
15. In Minnesota, workers aged 21 to 24 are eligible; in Colorado, workers aged 19 to 24 are eligible; in the other states listed, workers aged 18 to 24 are eligible. Childless workers aged 18 to 24 also are eligible under Puerto Rico's EITC.
16. For another thoughtful proposal to reform UI, see Wandner (2023).
17. Another SNAP reform that would aid indigent childless workers, among others, would be to allow previously incarcerated individuals with past drug-related felony convictions to qualify for SNAP. Arguing for such a measure, the CBPP's Ty Jones Cox said in congressional testimony in 2023, "Denying food assistance to people who have completed their sentences makes it harder for them to get back on their feet. . .. Given that formerly incarcerated people also face barriers and discrimination in employment and housing, it's not surprising that 91 percent are food insecure" (Cox 2023, 23). Cox noted that most states have used their flexibility under federal law to restore SNAP eligibility for some individuals who otherwise would be subject to this ban but that a substantial number of people who have served their sentences and are complying with parole or probation requirements remain ineligible for SNAP.
18. The president's budget does not specify which of these two approaches to closing the coverage gap it favors. It simply calls for providing Medicaid-like coverage in states that have not adopted the ACA expansion.
19. Fiedler (2023) further writes, "Without changes in the Marketplace enrollment process, enrolling in coverage would likely be harder under a Marketplace-based approach due to the need to select a [health] plan and, in some cases, pay a premium. …On the other hand, relying on a federal Medicaid program would require enrollees to transition between coverage programs when their income crossed 138 percent of the FPL. This eligibility 'seam' could cause coverage disruptions that would not occur under a Marketplace-based approach."
20. We access the Current Population Survey (CPS) data via IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. The historical SPM data come from the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University, https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/historical-spm-data-reg.
21. In 2018, Census released data based on an updated processing system. To facilitate comparisons across time, Census re-

leased two versions of 2017 data. One version is comparable to 2018, and the other version is comparable to earlier years. In this report we use 2017 data, using the previous methods, since we make comparisons to earlier years. The 2017 poverty rate, using thresholds anchored to 2021, was 14.2 percent when using the new methods and 15.2 percent when using the previous methods. Government assistance and taxes reduced poverty by 44 percent when using new methods and 41 percent when using the previous methods in 2017, before any adjustments for underreporting. For details on the changes in the Census survey, see Fox (2019).

22. For an analysis using SPM thresholds anchored to 2021, see Trisi 2023b.
23. Researchers who favor the relative SPM note that it aligns more closely with the recommendations of the 1995 National Academy of Sciences panel whose work led to the development of the SPM. The panel found that, over time, the view of the poverty line (i.e., the minimum amount of income needed to meet basic needs) that poverty experts and the public hold has tended to rise slightly faster than inflation, although it has risen more slowly than typical, or median, income levels, and that this evolution is best captured by changes in the amounts that typical families spend on food, clothing, shelter, and utilities. The panel recommended updating the poverty threshold annually based on changes in basic needs spending, as the relative SPM does.
24. This is the same definition used by Hingtgen, Saenz, and Zippel (2021).

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Over the past half-century, the U.S. safety net (i.e., the set of tax and transfer programs) has grown significantly stronger overall and especially for elderly people and children. But that has not been the case for non-elderly adults (aged 18-64) who are not raising children and do not receive federal disability benefits, a group that numbered nearly 106 million people in 2017. A new analysis of Census data conducted for this paper shows that in 2017, the safety net lifted out of poverty 69 percent of elderly people who would otherwise be poor and 44 percent of otherwise-poor children, both of which were dramatically higher percentages than in 1970. Among otherwise-poor childless adults not receiving disability benefits, however, the safety net lifted only 8 percent out of poverty in 2017, a percentage virtually unchanged since 1970. Today, one of every two Americans who lives in deep poverty—below 50 percent of the poverty line—is a non-elderly childless adult who does not receive disability benefits. These individuals also comprise the bulk of the homeless population. This paper explores these data and the large gaps in safety-net support for this population. It also considers various options at both federal and state levels that could strengthen support for this highly disadvantaged group.

Share of otherwise-poor people lifted out of poverty by government programs, 1970 and 2017

	1970	2017
Total U.S. population	9%	46%
Children (under 18)	−4%*	44%
Non-elderly adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are raising children	−11%*	38%
Elderly adults (65 and over)	37%	69%
Non-elderly childless adults (18 to 64) not receiving disability benefits who are not raising children	7%	8%

Source: Trisi 2023a.

Note: "Non-elderly adults not receiving disability benefits" refers to individuals aged 18–64 who do not receive SSI disability benefits or Social Security. See table 4 in this paper for a more comprehensive treatment of these data. *A minus sign indicates that income and payroll taxes pushed more people in the group in question from above the poverty line to below it than social programs lifted from below the poverty line to above it. Hence, the net effect of taxes and transfers on this group was to increase poverty rather than reduce it.

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