

Society Responsibility Toward “Losers”

Harry Strachan, started in 2013 and edited 140425

The Problem

I have three close friends, each of whom who has a child that has a long pattern of screwing up his or her life. From the time they were teenagers, in spite of adequate intelligence, they fail in their schooling. Each has gone through numerous jobs, some undertaken with great enthusiasm and some early success, but invariably lost these for one reason or another. Several have had their run-ins with the law and been jailed or barely saved from jail by their parent’s intervention. All have had off-and-on problem with drugs and alcohol.

It sounds judgmental and harsh, but the manner in which they repeatedly and (it sometimes seems) deliberately “snatch defeat from the jaws of victory” qualifies them for the label of “losers.”

I know these friends to be exemplary people, more conscientious as parents than ever I was. I’ve watched their unending attempts to help their children in all sorts of ways— hiring expert child psychologists for advice, investing hours of their own and tutors time to get them successfully through school, finding them subsidized job, giving them scholarships as adults for skills such as massage, or auto mechanic, or nurses aid.

They have all at one point or another also tried tough love, forced their adult children out of the home, even at the risk of their ending up homeless on the street. When they described all the interventions they’ve tried, I realized that they have been both creative and spared no expense to help. Yet in spite of all their efforts, nothing has worked. Their children now adults in their 30s, are not contributing members of society, they don’t support themselves, they are often in trouble with law, they are a continuing and deep source of heartbreak for their parents.

Seeing this I think if society (through our government agencies and non-profits), spent as much money and put as much effort on “losers” as my three friends have spent, the resources required would be huge. The evidence suggests that all these interventions tried by my friends appear to have totally failed. Nothing seems to have “worked”. I can’t imagine that unmotivated government employees with half the education of these parents would be more successful?

If so, then what sort of tax-payer funded programs would I advocate for people like their children? What in a good society should we ask our government and non-profits to do for people in their situation.

To help sharpen the question let me call on three speakers reflecting three possible answers.

Mr. Minimal Intervention.

Society should recognize that an attempt to block the law of cause and effect has a fatal flaw. Nature through the Darwinian mechanism has set up feedback systems that are by and large how people learn to be productive, get along, take care of themselves. Parents who set up safety nets are interfering with this learning and the results are not surprisingly.

If you design massive programs that try to replicate what your friends, Harry, are doing, not only do you waste enormous amounts of society's resources but you will create a society of victims, dependents, non-productive citizens. Isn't that the lesson of Johnson's great society welfare mother's programs which studies suggest have just bred more welfare mothers.

Government programs for infrastructure, education and health are important, but society can and should demand results from its investments and find ways of motivating citizens to participate productively. If they fail to do this, then society should let the natural results or punishments of failure fall as they will. Society has the right to demand that each citizen participate productively and the obligation to make sure that everyone who does participate productively, shares in the benefits. But society does not owe anyone anything for free.

Ms. Conditional support.

The position above is too harsh and does not recognize that productive participation in society requires that people start with a minimum of health and education and help. Children are not born self-sufficient. While parents probably have the greatest incentives and the best capacity to get their children on the right road and should therefore have every incentive to be the primary caregivers, children should not be penalized if their parents can't or won't do their job.

Society should, through the government supported programs, help those who through no fault of their own need either the education, food, health to a good start on the road. This principal could be extended to handicapped, veterans that are disabled, the elderly whose social security has run out etc. However, there are two limitations that society should put on programs designed to help others.

Effectiveness. There should be clear evidence that the intervention is solving the problem and that it is not creating side effects that exceed the benefits. If someone has a disease that is incurable, society does not have the responsibility to waste resources out of pity or because there is a hardship or need. If it can't be effective in solving the problem, there is no responsibility to help.

Personal responsibility. Once a child or person has gotten the basic help, they become responsible for their problems. Society should not protect them from the consequences of

their destructive actions. Harry. the responsibility to help your friend's children should end once they reach the age of responsibility. From there on they should bear the consequences of their destructive behavior.

Rev. Unconditional Support.

Society needs to take responsibility to ensure that all its citizens have their basic needs met. Yes, you try to invest in effective programs. Yes, you try to motivate productive behavior. But the fact that people are "losers" or "failures", that they are self-destructive or are paying for past mistakes, does not permit society to wash its hands of their needs. There are two important reasons for this.

The law of love. All of us know that we could be in their spot. No one is wise enough to draw the line between responsibility and irresponsibility. We are commanded to love each other, care for each other, true perhaps widows and orphans in particular, but all our fellow humans. We should treat others as we would wish to be treated in their position.

Our mutual interdependency. No man is an island; pure self-interest dictates that we meet need wherever it is found and for whatever reason it exists. The reality is that we are all one body, the hand can't say to the foot, just because you are injured, I am going to let you fester and develop gangrene. The quality of our own lives is and will be affected by all those around us, drug addicts, homeless, criminals. Individually and collectively we meet basic needs and never give up on trying to help each other become fully realized people.

So what do you think -- which of these philosophies should determine society's tax paid effort on behalf of "losers."?