

## [I just get so angry at this nonsense](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Saturday 22 September 2012

Yes, I'm sorry, this is one of my little hobby horses. But the way people misuse statistics, most especially the US poverty numbers, really just does annoy me. Here's a piece from what I regard as a good man doing good work. But it still angers [me deeply](#) [3]:

According to census data released Thursday, nationwide the number of people in poverty has grown to 48.5 million, or almost 16% of the population, the highest poverty number in the more than 50 years that it has been recorded. And while the data, although grim, appears to indicate the economy is slowly rebounding, it also provides some insight into what's working in our fight to feed the hungry, and what to expect in the coming months and years.

Food stamps work. According to the latest figures, food stamps lifted 3.9 million individuals out of poverty, including 1.7 million children, keeping food on the table for many families. Food stamps are working exactly as they should ? effectively responding to the economic realities of the time. Without them, the emergency hunger relief network in this country could not cope.

Now the bloke who wrote that runs a food bank. I think poverty alleviation's a good thing and I think that voluntary collective action to alleviate poverty is a very good thing indeed. So I've no problem at all with what he or his organisation do: I think they're both admirable and praiseworthy. It is purely the juxtaposition of those statistics that angers.

For that 48.5 million in poverty number is *before* we take account of the 3.9 million lifted out of poverty by food stamps. As it is also before the number taken out of poverty by almost all of the other things that the US does to alleviate poverty. Like tax credits, housing benefits, medical care and so on and on.

Everyone, just everyone, looks at the US poverty numbers and says "but that's terrible!". Without understanding that they are the numbers *before* poverty alleviation. Unlike the numbers of every other country where they are *after* poverty alleviation.

And yes it is an important point. Whether you are of left or right, whether you think there should be more done or less. For currently one side can say "look, we're spending hundreds of billions curing poverty but we've got just as many poor people so let's just stop spending the money". The other can say "look, we're spending hundreds of billions curing poverty but we've got just as many poor people so let's just spend more and more money". Because no one at all is counting the effect of the money being spent. And that is important: for what everyone would really like to know is "how effective is the money already being spent and how much more/less should we be spending?".

Which no one ever does ask because of the near insane way that the US measures poverty.

---

[blog comments powered by Disqus](#) [5]

---

Source URL: <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/welfare-pensions/i-just-get-so-angry-at-this-nonsense>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/welfare-pensions/i-just-get-so-angry-at-this-nonsense>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5778>

[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/20/poverty-hunger-america>

[4] [http://disqus.com/?ref\\_noscript](http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript)

[5] <http://disqus.com>