GUEST ESSAY

America Is in a Disgraced Class of Its Own

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The United States has a poverty problem.

A third of the country's people live in households making less than $55,000. Many are not officially counted among the poor, but there is plenty of economic hardship above the poverty line. And plenty far below it as well. According to the Supplemental Poverty Measure, which accounts for government aid and living expenses, more than one in 25 people in America 65 or older lived in deep poverty in 2021, meaning that they'd have to, at minimum, double their incomes just to reach the poverty line.

Programs like housing assistance and food stamps are effective and essential, protecting millions of families from hunger and homelessness each year. But the United States devotes far fewer resources to these programs, as a share of its gross domestic product, than other rich democracies, which places America in a disgraced class of its own on the world stage.

On the eve of the Covid pandemic, in 2019, our child poverty rate was roughly double that of several peer nations, including Canada, South Korea and Germany. Anyone who has visited these countries can plainly see the difference, can experience what it might be like to live in a country without widespread public decay. When abroad, I have on several occasions heard Europeans use the phrase "American-style deprivation."

Poverty is measured at different income levels, but it is experienced as an exhausting piling on of problems. Poverty is chronic pain, on top of tooth rot, on top of debt collector harassment, on top of the nauseating fear of eviction. It is the suffocation of your talents and your dreams. It is death come early and often. From 2001 to 2014, the richest women in America gained almost three years of life while the poorest gained just 15 days. Far from a line, poverty is a tight knot of humiliations and agonies, and its persistence in American life should shame us.

All the more so because we clearly have the resources and know-how to effectively end it. The bold relief issued by the federal government during the pandemic — especially expanded child tax credits, unemployment insurance and emergency rental assistance — plunged child poverty and evictions to record lows and powered a swift economic recovery. "I don't think we have ever seen a policy have as much impact as quickly as the child tax credit in 2021," Dorian Warren, a co-president of Community Change, a national organization aimed at empowering low-income people, told me. "In six months — six months — we reduced child poverty almost by half. We know how to do this."

We do — but predictably, some Americans with well-fed and well-housed families complained that the country could no longer afford investing so deeply in its children. At best, this was a breathtaking failure of moral imagination; at worst, it was a selfish, harmful lie.

We could fund powerful antipoverty programs through sensible tax reform and enforcement. A recent study estimates that collecting all unpaid federal income taxes from the top 1 percent — not raising their taxes, mind you, just putting an end to their tax evasion — would add $175 billion a year to the public purse. That's enough to more than double federal investment in affordable housing or to re-establish the expanded child tax credit. In fact, an additional $175 billion a year is almost enough to lift everyone out of poverty altogether.

The hard part isn't designing effective antipoverty policies or figuring out how to pay for them. The hard part is ending our addiction to poverty.

Poverty persists in America because many of us benefit from it. We enjoy cheap goods and services and plump returns on our investments, even as they often require a kind of human sacrifice in the form of worker maltreatment. We defend lavish tax breaks that accrue to wealthy Americans, starving antipoverty initiatives. And we build and defend exclusive communities, shutting out the poor and forcing them to live in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage.

Most Americans — liberals and conservatives alike — now believe people are poor because "they have faced more obstacles in life," not because of a moral failing. Long overdue, however, is a reckoning with the fact that many of us help to create and uphold those obstacles through the collective moral failing of enriching ourselves by impoverishing others. Poverty isn't just a failure of public policy. It's a failure of public virtue.

To break this cycle, we must commit to becoming poverty abolitionists.

Like abolitionist movements against slavery or mass incarceration, abolitionism views poverty not as a routine or inevitable social ill but as an abomination that can no longer be tolerated. And poverty abolitionism shares with other abolitionist movements the conviction that profiting from another's pain corrupts us all.

Ending poverty in America will require both short- and long-term solutions: strategies that stem the bleeding now, alongside more enduring interventions that target the disease and don't just treat the symptoms.

For example, to address the housing crisis forcing most poor renting families to dedicate at least half of their income to rent and utilities, we need to immediately expand housing vouchers that reduce the rent burden. But we also need to push for more transformative solutions like scaling up our public housing infrastructure, enlarging community land banks and providing on-ramps to homeownership for low-income families.

When it comes to work, we should attack labor exploitation head-on by finding ways to even the playing field between workers and bosses — supporting collective bargaining, for instance, and requiring that worker representatives be given seats on corporate boards. At the bare minimum, Congress should increase the federal minimum wage — which hasn't been raised since July 2009 — and, like dozens of other countries, allow the federal government to routinely adjust the wage without legislative approval, ensuring that workers wouldn't have to wait around another 13-plus years (and counting!) for a pay bump.

If we apply the legal scholar John A. Powell's "targeted universalism" approach to eradicating poverty — an approach that involves setting a goal and recognizing that certain groups will need distinctive interventions for that goal to be met — then our attitude toward different antipoverty policies should be "both and." We don't need new solutions to this problem as much as a new mind-set, a renewed national commitment to broad prosperity.

The ideal poverty rate in America is zero. Why settle for anything less? Why accept the boring, pernicious best-we-can-doism that has captured the inequality debate in recent years? "We have to challenge the tragedy, the catastrophe, of compromise," the Rev. William Barber II, one of the chairmen of the Poor People's Campaign, told me.

When the Johnson administration launched "an unconditional war on poverty in America" in 1964, it wasn't just lofty rhetoric. It set a deadline. Sargent Shriver, the director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, announced that "the target date for ending poverty in this land" would be 1976, the bicentennial. "We once had ambitions about poverty abolitionism," Dorian Warren reminded me, and we can rekindle that sense of urgency.

So rather than wait around for Congress to act, we should begin to act ourselves. Poverty abolitionism isn't just a political project, after all; it's a personal one, too. For starters, just as many of us are now shopping and investing in ways that address climate change, we can also do so with an eye toward economic justice. If we can, we should reward companies that treat their employees well and shun those with a track record of union busting and exploitation. To do so, we can consult organizations like B Lab, which certifies companies that meet high social and environmental standards, and Union Plus, which curates lists of union-made products.

These everyday decisions can add up to something. If more of us adopted poverty abolitionism as a way of living — and of seeing the world and imagining a better one — that behavior would spread, which in turn could redefine what is socially acceptable and what is believed possible. If enough of us found ways to show that we will no longer stand for so much immiseration, we would put upward pressure on corporate and elected leaders, potentially creating a groundswell of political will and renewed calls for reform.

We need to "create a new common sense," Jenn Stowe, the executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, told me. Working on behalf of nannies, house cleaners and home-care workers, the alliance is seeking to reframe our expectations around care — that it is a right, not a commodity, for instance — by "creating a pathway for people to see themselves in this movement," as Stowe put it. "It's going to take all of us."

We can also disrupt all the quotidian ways we normalize the status quo. It is commonplace for privileged Americans to gripe about taxes. But doing so ignores how the country's welfare state does much more to subsidize affluence — with tax breaks for college savings accounts, wealth transfers and more — than to alleviate poverty.

What if, the next time a co-worker brought up the topic, we talked about that instead? What if we gawked at the fact that homeowners pocket billions of dollars each year because of the mortgage interest deduction, an absurd cutout that flows primarily to well-off Americans, while most poor renting families receive no government housing assistance? What if some of those homeowners began donating a portion or even all of their mortgage deduction windfalls to eviction defense and began lobbying Congress to wind down the benefit and redirect the money to antipoverty initiatives?

That this straightforward, milquetoast proposal will strike some of us as audacious, even radical, shows just how constricted our moral ambitions have become and how much we've backslid as a nation committed to freedom and equal opportunity.

And we cannot in good faith claim a commitment to poverty abolitionism — or antiracism — if we continue to embrace segregation in our neighborhoods and schools. Our values should not end where our property line begins. Poverty abolitionists oppose exclusionary zoning laws and work to create inclusive neighborhoods. This means doing the hard work of tearing down the walls so many of us have built around our communities, lobbying neighbors, sharing evidence that shows that smartly designed affordable housing doesn't affect property values and showing up at zoning board meetings (where affordable housing proposals go to die) and voicing support for new developments.

In the 1960s, Dixiecrats aligned with Republicans to gum up the legislative process. Senators slept in their offices so they could filibuster liberal reforms. Governmental inertia was not only the outcome but the goal. (Sound familiar?) And yet, in the face of all that political polarization and obstructionism, major pieces of civil and voting rights legislation were signed into law and the modern social safety net was created with the passage of the Great Society and War on Poverty.

These transformative initiatives lifted millions out of poverty, outlawed discrimination and protected Black Americans' citizenship rights. If so much was accomplished despite the odds, it was because grass-roots organizers, and the civil rights and labor movements in particular, put unrelenting pressure on lawmakers.

Today, as then, the best hope we have of ending poverty is to bind ourselves together and demand this of our country. A mass movement for economic justice is necessary. One led by those who have had enough is stirring. We can join them, no matter our lot in life.

This rich country has the means to abolish poverty. Now we must find the will to do so — the will not to reduce poverty but to end it.

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