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**POVERTY AND INEQUALITY: A NEW DEAL FOR AMERICA'S MOST
DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES**

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POVERTY AND INEQUALITY: A NEW DEAL FOR AMERICA'S
MOST DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

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by

Thomas St. Hilaire

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Thomas St. Hilaire

Paul Gaffney

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ABSTRACT

POVERTY AND INEQUALITY: A NEW DEAL FOR AMERICA'S MOST DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

Thomas St. Hilaire

The United States, often hailed as the most affluent nation globally, paradoxically grapples with rates of poverty, disadvantage, and inequality that surpass those of its advanced democratic counterparts. The persistence of poverty and inequality in the United States have often been justified by beliefs of welfare dependency, “free market” thinking and utilitarianism. This master's thesis explores the far-reaching moral, political, and economic consequences of America's high rates of poverty and inequality. It contends that federal action is urgently needed on more robust social programs that target poverty, such as affordable housing, accessible healthcare, greater worker protections, and deepened social capital investments in high poverty communities that have historically been exploited.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson ambitiously declared a war on poverty, signing the Economic Opportunity Act. President Johnson pronounced that poverty is a spiral of one struggling for existence while opportunities are granted to surrounding society. In his address to Congress, Johnson acknowledged the health consequences of poverty, along with the impact poverty has on the young – the way poverty traps individuals in a vicious cycle, saying, “the young man or woman who grows up without a decent education, in a broken home, in a hostile and squalid environment, in ill health or in the face of racial injustice-that young man or woman is often trapped in a life of poverty.”¹ There are many other negative impacts that poverty has on individuals and families, as well as on society as a whole. What’s most important to note, however, is that in the more than 50 years since, we’ve been unable to maximize progress on improving the state of poverty, and inequality has worsened. As I will argue throughout this essay, the persistence of poverty and inequality in the United States – which have often been justified by the beliefs of welfare dependency, “free market” thinking and utilitarianism – presents an economically inefficient, immoral, and politically unstable arrangement. As such, federal action is urgently needed on more robust policies and social programs that target poverty at its roots.

Understanding the scope and scale of the poverty problem requires recognizing the different ways to measure poverty. Each metric tells a different story – yet I would argue that they all demonstrate the need to address poverty with federal action. The

¹ Lyndon B. Johnson, Special Message to the Congress Proposing a Nationwide War on the Sources of Poverty | The American Presidency Project, March 16, 1964, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-proposing-nationwide-war-the-sources-poverty>.

federal government's poverty line, while fairly criticized for not reflecting the true state of poverty or the impact of government spending, tells a story of stagnation. 13 percent of the U.S. population was poor in 1970; forty years later in 2010, it was approximately 15 percent; and in 2021, it was 11.6 percent, which translates to approximately 37.9 million Americans.² While the poverty line ebbs and flows, it has largely remained stagnant in the long-run.

Relative measures of poverty, which define poverty relative to the median income of a country, tell a similar story of stagnation. Relative measures consider whether or not individuals are able to have a level of comfort that's normal in their society. It weighs the absence of basic standards of living that are customary in the United States.³ The number of Americans earning just 10 percent, 15 percent, or 20 percent of the United States' median income has largely gone unchanged over the last several decades.⁴

The only metric by which poverty has improved is what's known as absolute measures of poverty – where a fixed dollar threshold is set, and is adjusted for inflation. There are some that prefer absolute over relative measures, because changes in the poverty rate only happen when people near the bottom get richer or poorer. While poverty has decreased by this metric, one shouldn't celebrate the fact that only 7 million Americans are living in poverty by the most generous of measures in a country as wealthy as the United States – particularly as the very social spending programs that led

² U.S. Census Bureau, John Creamer, Emily A. Shrider, Kalee Burns, and Frances Chen, Poverty In The United States: 2021 §. Current Population Reports (2022), Page 3, Figure 1.

³ Peter Townsend, Poverty in the United Kingdom a Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living (Berkeley u.a.: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1979), Page 915.

⁴ Dylan Matthews, "Why Even Brilliant Scholars Misunderstand Poverty in America," Vox, March 10, 2023, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2023/3/10/23632910/poverty-official-supplemental-relative-absolute-measure-desmond>.

to such reduction are consistently undermined, threatened, and politicized by elected officials.⁵ By absolute measures, there's improvement, but only because the goal we're aiming for is uninspiringly and unimaginatively low.

However, regardless of one's metric of choice, it's important to note that somewhere between 7 million to nearly 38 million Americans are living in poverty – all while measures of inequality, such as wages and working conditions are dismal. The United States has some of the lowest wages in the industrialized world, as evidenced by the fact that a larger share of workers in the United States make “low pay” than the vast majority of other countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Nearly 23 percent of American workers have low-paying jobs, compared with roughly 17 percent in Britain, 11 percent in Japan and 5 percent in Italy.⁶ American wages are lower, because America is in a race to the bottom. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the wages of low-wage workers fell by 5 percent from 1979 to 2013. In contrast, the hourly wages of high-wage workers rose 41 percent.”⁷ The United States has lowered wages for those in poverty, in order to subsidize higher wages for those with pre-existing economic comfort.

These low wages are often coupled with poor working conditions and non-existent healthcare. It's become normalized when pickers in Amazon warehouses

⁵ Richard Burkhauser et al., working paper, Evaluating the Success of President Johnson's War on Poverty: Revisiting the Historical Record Using a Full-Income Poverty Measure (American Enterprise Institute, December 2019), <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Burkhauser-Corinth-Elwell-Larrimore-President-Johnson-War-on-Poverty-WP-1.pdf?x91208>.

⁶ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Wage levels §. Accessed October 2023. <https://data.oecd.org/earnwage/wage-levels.htm#indicator-chart>.

⁷ Josh Bivens, Lawrence Mishel, and Elise Gould, rep., Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts (Economic Policy Institute, January 6, 2015), <https://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/>, Figure 4.

have access to vending machines dispensing free Advil and Tylenol⁸, but tens of millions of Americans remain completely uninsured a decade after the passage of the Affordable Care Act.⁹ As a country, we've made enormous progress curing diseases, notably curing COVID-19 in less than 18 months. We've made information more widely accessible. Delivery services can bring any cuisine to a door in a matter of minutes, or an 80-inch flat screen television to their home in a matter of days. Artificial intelligence can eloquently summarize the plot of Hamlet. Yet, despite all of these medical, material, and technological achievements, we've made insufficient and inadequate progress on reducing suffering for millions of Americans. Somehow, the United States, which is often praised as the most affluent nation in the world, has failed to create sufficient mobility for those in poverty.

This is an economic, political, and moral crisis. Yet, when attempts are made to understand how the United States got to this point, the explanations that are given fall short. One popular theory for why the United States has made little progress in poverty and made massive losses in wages is that we've all been burdened by forces beyond our control. Some cite globalization as the primary villain, while others cite deindustrialization. Poverty, according to these voices, is the product of the way the economy has changed. There's no doubt that the world has changed, but the globalization framing often implies that we shrug our shoulders and bow down to the almighty market

⁸ Juliana Feliciano Reyes, "Pain Meds and Bathroom Dashes: A Philly Author's Time Working At An Amazon Warehouse," Philadelphia Inquirer, July 9, 2019, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/working-amazon-warehouse-fulfillment-center-emily-guendelsberger-on-the-clock-20190709.html>.

⁹ "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2022." United States Census Bureau, September 23, 2023. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/income-poverty-health-insurance-coverage.html#:~:text=SEPT.,different%20between%202021%20and%202022.>

– which should never have any guardrails whatsoever. This line of thinking is uncreative and lifeless. And the “economy has changed” argument fails to explain why many other countries – as I’ve noted in the pages leading up to this point – haven’t experienced the growing inequality and wage stagnation that the United States has. The truth is that misguided belief systems are primarily to blame, as they’ve played an enormous role in justifying poverty and influencing public policy.

The first misguided belief system is that welfare leads to dependence, and by extension to laziness. In Ronald Reagan’s inaugural speech, he linked social programs and public goods to national decline.¹⁰ The Reagan administration followed this with more than \$22 billion in cuts to social welfare programs in 1981 and 1982¹¹, including federal student loans and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, a program that paid businesses to train and hire economically disadvantaged people. The Reagan administration made poor people even more poor¹², throwing punches left and right at the Americans that were already bleeding the most – all under the presumption that welfare was a drug. Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump all continued this legacy and built on this narrative that aid to the poor is a rotten poison. Medical care, food, and shelter make people lazy.

Classical economic theory is often the thrust behind this argument, as it is often suggested that when governments provide benefits, individuals work less or decide to

¹⁰ Reagan, Ronald. “First Inaugural Address of Ronald Reagan.” *The Avalon Project*. Speech, January 20, 1981.

¹¹ Danziger, Sheldon, and Robert Haveman. Rep. *The Reagan Administration’s Budget Cuts: Their Impact On The Poor*, n.d. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc52b.pdf>.

¹² Rich, Spencer. “Reagan Welfare Cuts Found To Worsen Families’ Poverty.” *Washington Post*, July 29, 1984.

rely on welfare, since earning more would eliminate eligibility for benefits. However, this notion that social welfare is a magnet for dependence contradicts ample evidence that welfare does not increase dependence on government.¹³ In a study that analyzed different experimental trials of government cash-transfer programs throughout the developing world, people who received benefits tended to be working already, and there was no evidence that systematic income support reduced work. In an even more recent study, Sarah Jane Baird, David J. McKenzie, and Berk Özler of the World Bank reviewed the economics literature on this topic and came to a similar conclusion.¹⁴ This abstract economic theory, under the microscope of rigorous examination, shows that welfare is not necessarily a poison or a drug, and it can instead be a trampoline.

This isn't to say that social programs will never reduce work incentives, but it is to say that well-designed policies can mitigate potential negative impacts on work incentives. As the example above regarding cash payments shows, there are ways to implement public policy – such as a cash-transfer program – in a way that doesn't have adverse effects on work. The goal should be to maximize public policy in a way that elevates the positive externalities of social spending and mitigates the negative externalities of social spending – rather than abandoning the project of poverty reduction altogether. Instead of limiting social spending in an effort to stick it to the “freeloaders,” a more inspiring vision could be to make social spending a springboard of upward mobility

¹³ Hanna, Rema. “Dispelling the Myth of Welfare Dependency.” *Evidence for Policy Design*. Harvard Kennedy School, August 9, 2019. <https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/article/dispelling-myth-welfare-dependency>.

¹⁴ Baird, Sarah Jane; McKenzie, David J.; Ozler, Berk. The effects of cash transfers on adult labor market outcomes (English). Policy Research working paper, no. WPS 8404 Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/334251523556191237/The-effects-of-cash-transfers-on-adult-labor-market-outcomes>

by giving those in poverty the types of dependable assistance that builds long-term financial, social, and health-related capital.

The second misguided belief system that often justifies poverty is market triumphalism, or the belief that one should blindly obey the outcomes of markets. Markets, according to the market triumphalist, are conducted freely so their outcomes therefore must always be just, because decisions made through this arrangement were made freely, autonomously, and without coercion. If someone is wealthy, it's because they utilized their freedom to make the right choices, and if someone is poor, they need to make better choices.

Ronald Reagan, speaking to members of the IMF and the World Bank in September of 1981 said, "... the societies that have achieved the most spectacular, broad-based progress are neither the most tightly controlled, nor the biggest in size, nor the wealthiest in natural resources. No, what unites them all is their willingness to believe in the magic of the marketplace."¹⁵ The problem with advanced obedience to the "magic of the marketplace" is that it not only ignores inequality and dismisses the suffering of citizens, it actively justifies those outcomes. It attempts to oppose inequalities that arise from birth, but simultaneously justifies those that arise from "free" and "fair" markets.

Market triumphalism also removes morality and justice from the conversation surrounding poverty, removing judgment on the preferences they satisfy. Markets don't care if the economy is growing for those in poverty or those with private planes – just that the economy is growing. Michael Sandel, in his book *What Money Can't Buy, The*

¹⁵ Perry, M. J. (2013, September 26). Quotation of the day on the 'magic of the marketplace' [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/carpe-diem/quotation-of-the-day-on-the-magic-of-the-marketplace/>

Moral Limits of Markets said, “If someone is willing to pay for sex or a kidney, and a consenting adult is willing to sell, the only question the economist asks is, “How much?” Markets don’t wag fingers. They don’t discern the differences between admirable or rotten preferences.”¹⁶

Bobby Kennedy prophesied the dangers of market triumphalism. In a 1968 speech in Kansas, Kennedy said, “Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them... Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”¹⁷ Market triumphalism is a key belief that’s, perhaps inadvertently, justified modern day inequality and poverty by removing morality from the conversation on poverty, and by justifying poverty in the name of “freedom” and economic growth for the affluent.

Yet, there’s a third and very prevalent belief system that justifies poverty – with its roots in philosophy and the works of Karl Marx and Thomas Hobbes – which is often referred to as utilitarianism or the idea that actions are acceptable if they benefit the majority. While Hobbes’ attitudes towards poverty specifically are ambiguous and

¹⁶ Sandel, Michael J. *What Money Can’t Buy, The Moral Limits of Markets*. London: Penguin, 2013.

¹⁷ Kennedy, Robert. Speech. *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*. March 18, 1968. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/remarks-at-the-university-of-kansas-march-18-1968>.

nuanced, Hobbes does believe that self-interest is a fundamental human motivation.

Hobbes' view on self-interest is related to poverty, because it could be reasonably argued that poverty exists because of self interest for the majority. According to this view, high wage earners embrace market triumphalism, not just because it's intellectually appealing, but because it benefits the many that have the privilege of experiencing economic growth.

Poverty for a smaller group means growth for a larger group. In an unregulated system, Hobbes believed that human nature is a state where individuals naturally seek to dominate others and demand their respect.¹⁸ Growth has a dark side. There will always be winners and losers, but the winners will constantly use their privilege and advantage to increase their privilege and advantage. Those at the top use predatory tactics to prevent labor from organizing. They lobby against legislation to raise the minimum wage.

Inequality is accumulation of power at the top at the expense of power for the rest. James Madison warned of this outcome, saying that, "If a majority be united by a common interest, the rights of the minority will be insecure."¹⁹

One person's poverty is another person's profit, but that principle doesn't just apply to the caricature of a Wall Street banker in a pinstriped suit. It's also consumers that, as a result of self-interest, benefit from poverty. While tens of millions of Americans are unable to earn a living wage, the result for the remaining hundreds of millions of Americans is cheaper goods. The uber driver, the food deliverer, the grocery store worker, and the Amazon warehouse worker that struggle to make a living wage are the

¹⁸ Lloyd, Sharon A. and Susanne Sreedhar, "Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/hobbes-moral/>.

¹⁹ Guinier, L., & Brody, B. A. (1999). Persistent Minorities and Fairness. In G. Sher (Ed.), Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Readings. essay, Harcourt Brace. Page 340.

reason why consumer goods are cheap and convenient. This is something Karl Marx forecasted. Marx believed that workers were doomed to be subjected to the “law of increasing misery” where the suffering of workers steadily rises as capitalism and exploitation intensify.²⁰

This belief system fundamentally justifies means through their ends, and the means involve exploitation and systemic inequality. The utilitarian framework, which prioritizes actions that benefit the majority, neglects the dignity and rights of individuals, especially those suffering from poverty. This means the well-being of certain individuals are expendable in the pursuit of a greater collective good, and economic efficiency is placed above the human rights and dignity of workers. If this logic were to be applied universally and consistently, across a wider range of issues, one could imagine truly abhorrent, unequal, and unacceptable labor conditions. It’s a form of logic, in this case, that’s only tolerated by those who benefit from it, and a classic form of thinking that’s historically been used to fuel oppression. It leads to a societal structure where the needs and interests of the less powerful are not just overlooked but systematically suppressed.

In short, I would argue that belief systems such as fear of welfare dependency, market triumphalism and utilitarianism have long justified inaction on poverty and opposition to federal welfare spending. But do we have an obligation to do anything about it? The short answer, I would contend, is yes – we have a moral obligation, a political obligation, and an economic obligation to push back against these belief

²⁰ Simkhovitch, Vladimir G.. "VI. The Theory of Increasing Misery" In *Marxism Versus Socialism*, 98-127. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1913.
<https://doi.org/10.7312/simk91936-007>

systems, and address poverty at its roots with bold redistributive policies that target poverty's existence.

ECONOMIC OBLIGATION TO ADDRESSING POVERTY

Whenever poverty or inequality are discussed, the United States often turns to economists for answers. After all, economics is a discipline explicitly designed for addressing scarcity and its implications for the use of resources, production of goods and services, and welfare.²¹ It's about determining the most effective use of resources, and addressing poverty on a macro-level often requires using significant resources. Poverty and inequality, to the economist, is a highly intellectual and calculating problem to address.

Poverty, inequality, and by extension, redistribution, have been debated and studied extensively. Conservative and libertarian thinkers, such as Milton Friedman, Robert Nozick, and Friedrich Von Hayek have in some ways argued for the notion of market triumphalism described above. They believed that the government should have a limited role in addressing poverty or inequality. All three of these thinkers could be characterized as supporting a fairly minimal government. Hayek argued that the State should limit its functions to protecting its citizens against violence, theft and fraud and to the enforcement of contracts, while Friedman and Nozick hint that some additional functions may be permitted.²² Underscoring these beliefs in market triumphalism and utilitarianism – often held by traditionally conservative advocates for free markets – is that markets do not lie. After all, despite the lack of necessary improvement on poverty, the United States has seen consistent GDP growth.

²¹ “What Is Economics?,” University at Buffalo Department of Economics, October 4, 2022, <https://arts-sciences.buffalo.edu/economics/about/what-is-economics.html>.

²² Byrne, Sean. “Defenders of Inequality: Milton Friedman and Robert Nozick.” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 75, no. 298 (1986): 186–95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30090732>.

I would argue, however, that markets can be quite deceiving and poverty can prevent the economy from growing to its fullest potential for several reasons. First and foremost, poverty is economically inefficient because it means a large percentage of Americans are unable to maximize the full nature of their talents. Consider this, in 1960, 94 percent of all doctors and lawyers were white men. While this was undoubtedly bad for the individuals that were blocked from certain careers (primarily non-men), it was also bad for society, or the economy, as a whole. According to a research brief from the University of Chicago, “if talented people were prevented from contributing at their comparative advantage, then the benefits of that labor were lost to the economy. Or, viewed from the converse, the many mediocre workers who otherwise kept their jobs were necessarily delivering less-than-optimal returns to the economy.”²³ GDP was growing during this period of time, but perhaps not as much as it could have grown.

That same idea holds true when considering that tens of millions of Americans living in poverty are unable to maximize the full nature of their talents. In fact, the cost is even higher, because the United States doesn’t just exclude them from the opportunity to contribute at their comparative advantage. The United States also incarcerates a significant portion of those living in poverty. More than 6.5 million people in the United States—about equal to the population of Massachusetts—were either incarcerated, on probation, or on parole in 2016.²⁴ The U.S. prison population predominantly consists of those living in poverty and also draws on some of the nation’s other most disadvantaged

²³ Chang-Tai Hsieh et al., Issue Brief, *The Allocation of Talent and US Economic Growth* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2020).

²⁴ U.S. Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Correctional Populations in the United States, 2016*. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/correctional-populations-united-states-2016>

groups.²⁵ There's an entire social justice issue at play here, which is a topic for a separate paper. But this much is clear: it's difficult to suggest that poverty is a necessary evil for economic growth, when so many individuals are locked in cages and unable to fulfill their full potential. It's also difficult to suggest this is "economically sound" when the United States spends \$81 billion per year on mass incarceration – far more than any other country in the world.²⁶

This also leads to another critical point: poverty breeds a long list of negative externalities – for both the individual and the society as a whole. One significant negative externality that poverty creates is increased crime rates. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "Only the percent of families below the poverty level positively correlated with both violent crime and property crime rates. There are no other social variables theoretically linked to crime that can plausibly explain the correlation consistency over time."²⁷ Another negative externality of poverty is that it often leads to more poverty. People living in poverty may stop going to school so they can work, which leaves them without the literacy and mathematical skills they need to further their careers.²⁸ Research confirms that many perceptions of the "American dream" rest on

²⁵ The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences, National Research Council Committee on Law and Justice, National Academy of Sciences, April 2014. <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/18613/the-growth-of-incarceration-in-the-united-states-exploring-causes>

²⁶ Casey Kuhn, "The U.S. Spends Billions to Lock People up, but Very Little to Help Them Once They're Released," *PBS News Hour*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/the-u-s-spends-billions-to-lock-people-up-but-very-little-to-help-them-once-theyre-released>.

²⁷ Louis Lieberman and Alexander B Smith, "Crime Rates and Poverty - A Reexamination," *Crime and Social Justice*, no. 25 (1986), <https://doi.org/https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/crime-rates-and-poverty-reexamination#additional-details-0>.

²⁸ "Poverty and Education," ChildFund, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://www.childfund.org/about-us/education/#:~:text=Poverty%20and%20education%20are%20inextricably,need%20to%20further%20their%20careers.>

shaky grounds. According to a report from the Brookings Institution, Americans are quite unlikely to move far up the wealth ranks early in life, and their chances decrease with age.²⁹ The best predictor of how far one will go in life is how wealthy their parents are, and this is especially true for those in poverty.

This vicious cycle of poverty means the individual and community as a whole are at a competitive disadvantage, and thereby limits the fullest possible economic growth. As mentioned previously, individuals in poverty may lack skills that maximize their fullest potential talent, which is further exacerbated by limited access to high quality education. They could be limited by a health condition that has gone unaddressed, due to limited access to healthcare. They may be limited by the fact that they lack social capital, due to living every day as an exercise of survival. For society as a whole, this means less entrepreneurship. Individuals in poverty often lack the financial resources and social networks needed to start and sustain a business, such as access to credit. This inevitably limits the entry of new competitors into markets.

Finally, poverty harms the United States' economic potential because it violates the law of diminishing marginal utility. Paul Krugman, commenting on the rise of Alexandria Ocasio Cortez in 2019, articulated precisely why this is the case. Krugman said, "Diminishing marginal utility is the common-sense notion that an extra dollar is worth a lot less in satisfaction to people with very high incomes than to those with low incomes. Give a family with an annual income of \$20,000 an extra \$1,000 and it will make a big difference to their lives. Give a guy who makes \$1 million an extra thousand

²⁹ Ariel Gelrud Shiro et al., rep., *Stuck On The Ladder: Intergenerational Wealth Mobility In The United States*, June 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022_FMCI_IntragenerationalWealthMobility_FINAL.pdf.

and he'll barely notice it."³⁰ The law of diminishing marginal utility is often the thrust behind progressive tax programs that aim to levy higher taxes on the wealthiest Americans, and it's why Peter Diamond and Emmanuel Saez, two leading experts on economic inequality, have found that the optimal top tax rate should be approximately 73 percent.³¹

A common rebuttal to all of these lines of thinking is that programs to address poverty are expensive, and unfairly take money from the wealthy Americans that have earned their share of the pie. The first point worth highlighting, however, is that tax increases have minimal impact on the growth rate or behavior of wealthy Americans. Using economic logic, a policy that makes the rich poorer will affect only a small group of people, and have little impact on that narrow group. For those that it does impact, it will have little impact on their life satisfaction, since they will still be able to buy and purchase whatever goods they desire. From an economist's standpoint, tax policy toward the rich should have little to do with the interests of the rich, and instead be more concerned with how incentives change the behavior of the rich. Most progressive tax programs do not change the behavior of the rich, and there's little correlation between tax increases and growth rate.^{32 33}

³⁰ Paul Krugman, "The Economics of Soaking the Rich," *New York Times*, January 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/05/opinion/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-tax-policy-dance.html>.

³¹ Diamond, Peter, and Emmanuel Saez. 2011. "The Case for a Progressive Tax: From Basic Research to Policy Recommendations." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 25 (4): 165-90.

³² "Historical Highest Marginal Income Tax Rates," Tax Policy Center, May 11, 2023, <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/statistics/historical-highest-marginal-income-tax-rates>.

³³ "Real Gross Domestic Product: Percent Change From Quarter One Year Ago," Bureau of Economic Analysis Interactive Data Application, accessed November 18, 2023, https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/?reqid=19&step=3&isuri=1&select_all_years=1&nipa_table_list=310&series=q&first_year=2018&last_year=2020&scale=-99&categories=survey&thetable=.

Secondly, arguments in opposition to redistribution have a layer of hypocrisy, because the United States is actually spending significant dollars subsidizing the rich. Consider this: in 2020, the federal government spent more than \$193 billion on homeowner subsidies, far exceeding the \$53 billion spent on direct housing assistance for low income families.³⁴ The same could be true of other government programs. The United States spends \$1.4 trillion subsidizing retirement benefits provided by employers³⁵, while also spending significant dollars subsidizing student loans and 529 college savings plans and child tax credits – all programs disproportionately going to Americans well above the poverty line.

Matthew Desmond notes that, “today, the biggest beneficiaries of federal aid are affluent families. To benefit from employer-sponsored health insurance, you need a good job, usually one that requires a college degree. To benefit from the mortgage interest deduction, you need to be able to afford a home, and those who can afford the biggest mortgages reap the biggest deductions.”³⁶ Even if one points out that the rich theoretically pay more in income taxes, it’s entirely different when one looks at the share of taxes paid. While the federal income tax is progressive, (meaning the tax burdens grow as incomes increase), most other taxes are regressive. For example, when a low-income earner pays sales tax at the grocery store, the most affluent pay the same tax if they make the same purchase, regardless of income level. When all taxes are accounted for, the four hundred

³⁴ Jennifer Ludden, “Poverty, By America’ Shows How the Rest of Us Benefit by Keeping Others Poor,” *NPR*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/17/1158230630/poverty-by-america-book-review-matthew-desmond-evicted>.

³⁵ Rep., *Policy Basics: Where Do Our Federal Tax Dollars Go?* (Center On Budget and Policy Priorities, September 28, 2023), <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-where-do-our-federal-tax-dollars-go>.

³⁶ Matthew Desmond, *Poverty, by America* (London: Allen Lane, 2023), Page 93.

richest Americans are taxed at 23 percent, while poor and middle class Americans dedicate approximately 25 percent of their income to taxes.³⁷ The most help is given to those that need it least – which contributes to the economic inefficiency of the arrangement.

³⁷ Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, *The Triumph of Injustice: How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay* (New York: Norton, 2019), 13-16; Internal Revenue Service, *IRS Provides Tax Inflation Adjustments for Tax Year 2020* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2019).

POLITICAL OBLIGATION TO ADDRESSING POVERTY

Poverty, however, does not just have consequences for economic life. It also has consequences for political life, and the political research on inequality has grown in recent years. While there is great debate in the field of economics over inequality and poverty, there seems to be less debate in the field of political science – in part because not many thinkers argue inequality is good for political life. Some may have a more apathetic attitude towards it, but a large body of the research suggests that poverty and inequality lead to many enormous political consequences.

The most glaring political consequence of poverty and inequality are populist resentment – the very kind that we’ve seen uncoincidentally grow in the United States as inequality has worsened. Populism is characterized as an ideology “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups.”³⁸ If we have any desire for less resentful and more respectful public discourse, we have an obligation to ending poverty. According to Joseph Stiglitz, inequality creates fertile ground for populists, who often argue that the system is rigged and therefore needs to be completely overthrown. Stiglitz says, “It gives them an argument that they can make about the system being rigged. And that’s especially true when the inequality is created by political processes — where there are people who aren’t paying their fair share of taxes, where people feel that they’re exploited in one way or another by the system.”³⁹

³⁸ Anna Grzymala-Busse et al., rep., *Global Populisms and Their Challenges*, March 2020, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/global-populisms/global-populisms-and-their-challenges>.

³⁹ Christina Pazzanese, “Joseph Stiglitz Warned of Wealth Gap in 2012 — and It’s Gotten Worse,” *The Harvard Gazette*, March 31, 2022, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/03/nobel-winning-economist-says-inequality-breeds-discontent/>.

Poverty and inequality also lead to populist resentment by deeming millions of Americans as losers, and the rest as winners. This primarily comes in the form of meritocratic self-righteousness, or the tendency for those at the top to view success as their own doing, and as a result, look down upon those that are less successful, because “they must deserve it.” This hubris has perpetuated the propaganda that economic success is the primary measure of virtue.

Some may argue that success or lack thereof is deserved. Yet this notion, that we deserve our success and others deserve their failure, fails to acknowledge two key points. First, it’s ignorant to the fact that everyone is starting the race at unequal starting points. It’s extremely difficult to argue that the outcome of a wildly unfair race – a race where many are able to get a head start, break the rules, or have access to more rigorous training and nutrition – is a true reflection of intrinsic talent. Meritocracy ignores the inequities that each unique individual is handed, and falsely assumes the United States is a level playing field where success solely depends on individual effort and talent. Secondly, meritocracy ignores the role that luck plays in an individual’s fate. Factors beyond one’s control, such as the family that they are born in, the school they had access to, or the other opportunities they encountered, certainly play a role in the success one has. This aspect of luck undermines the mistaken notion that success or failure is entirely deserved on the principle of merit.

Furthermore, it’s a big mistake when we convince ourselves that our success is our own doing. The myth of meritocracy creates a hubris that leads to populist resentment by effectively creating a politics of humiliation—one where we stigmatize the poor and applaud the wealthy. As Michael Sandel argues, “This way of thinking makes it hard to

believe that we are in this together. It invites the winners to consider their success as their own doing and the losers to feel that those on the top look down with disdain.”⁴⁰ More than sixty years ago, sociologist Michael Young saw this coming. In Young’s book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, he explored what would happen if society fully embraced meritocracy, and he predicted that this society was bound to foster hubris in the winners and humiliation in the losers. The winners would believe that their success was just reward for their “self-made” abilities, and therefore look down on those that were less successful. Those who failed to rise would believe that their failure was all their fault, leading to the loss of social esteem, civic dignity, and political community.⁴¹

In addition to creating resentment that’s fueled by the absence of dignity, Sandel also notes that when we forget our indebtedness to teachers, family, community, and country, it leads to moral decay. He says, “It diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate. It leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes.”⁴² If we want to reverse the intolerance, vengeful nationalism, and populist resentment that is rising around the world, we must confront the damaging and corrosive effects of meritocracy and hubris by combating poverty. Michael Sandel writes that, “democracy does not require perfect equality, but it does require that citizens share in a common life... for this is how we learn to negotiate and abide our differences.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), Page 5.

⁴¹ Krastev, Ivan. “The Rise and Fall of European Meritocracy.” *New York Times*. New York, January 17, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/17/opinion/the-rise-and-fall-of-european-meritocracy.html>.

⁴² Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), Page 25.

⁴³ Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), Page 203.

The evidence for poverty breeding populist resentment isn't purely philosophical or anecdotal. It's also quantifiable. According to Jon Clifton, CEO of Gallup polling, fiscal wellbeing is critical to overall happiness – a critical precursor to understanding democratic and societal stability. In Clifton's book, *Blind Spot: the Global Rise of Unhappiness and How Leaders Missed It* that "Money may not buy happiness, but it is hard to be happy without it."⁴⁴ And according to Gallup, unhappiness is at a record high. People feel more anger, sadness, pain, worry, and stress than ever before.⁴⁵

Clifton's groundbreaking book offers examples of the political consequences that emerge when misery and unhappiness climb. And evidence of increased misery that's fueled by poverty is not difficult to find. In the midst of 2020's heated election season, sixty-six percent of Americans said that the nation was in decline.⁴⁶ Seventy percent of Americans said that if the "wrong" candidate won, "America would not recover."⁴⁷ If we seek to alleviate the political problem of polarization and populist resentment, we should take poverty seriously, and embrace the advice of Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman who has said, "increasing happiness and reducing misery are different things... I would not focus on the positive end. I would focus on the negative end, and I would say it is a responsibility of society to try to reduce misery."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Jon Clifton, *Blind Spot: The Global Rise of Unhappiness and How Leaders Missed It* (Washington D.C: Gallup Press, 2022), Page 16.

⁴⁵ Jon Clifton, *Blind Spot: The Global Rise of Unhappiness and How Leaders Missed It* (Washington D.C: Gallup Press, 2022), Page 7.

⁴⁶ Hunter, J., Bowman, C., & Puetz, K. (2020, November). Democracy in Dark Times. Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. <https://iasculture.org/research/publications/democracy-in-dark-times>.

⁴⁷ Braver Angels (2020, October). YouGov Poll Results. Braver Angels. <https://braverangels.org/yougov-poll-results-2/>.

⁴⁸ Jon Clifton, *Blind Spot: The Global Rise of Unhappiness and How Leaders Missed It* (Washington D.C: Gallup Press, 2022), Page 12.

There's another key way though that poverty has eroded political life. Yes – poverty has increased social separation, and led to increased resentment. But it has also led to the deterioration of public goods that make any advanced democracy function to its fullest potential. Take the United States' public school system, for example. Affluent individuals, in an attempt to provide what they view as the best possible education for their child, send their child to a private school, or a school in a wealthy suburb, where they are surrounded by other students of high socio-economic status. As a result, affluent individuals utilize the public education system in inner-cities less. They therefore become less supportive of funding those schools through tax dollars. The result of this is a failure to create public schools where rich and poor alike have the opportunity and desire to send their children to the same school. It's a system where education is dependent on the socio-economic status of one's parents. Inner-city schools are disinvested in, in order to subsidize the already wealthy suburban and private schools. It's therefore unsurprising that school segregation remains such a prevalent problem today.

The same goes for public transportation, another critical public good. Earlier generations made massive investments in the federal highway program. While it gave some Americans unprecedented mobility and freedom, it also resulted in highways being built in the middle of less affluent communities. It contributed to the reliance on the private auto-mobile, rather than the trains, subways, and buses that citizens interact with one another on. The erosion of public goods is consequential for political life, because it removes any common life between rich and poor. It means citizens from different walks of life can go a lifetime without encountering one another. And it means that we trap

those in poverty in a life cycle of poverty by giving them under-funded schools, transportation, and other basic engines of opportunity.

MORAL OBLIGATION TO ADDRESSING POVERTY

Finally, poverty isn't just a lackluster economic arrangement, or fuel for a long list of political issues. Poverty is also deeply unjust, and its continuation in the United States is a moral failure. If one presumes justice only exists when individuals are able to exercise freedom and autonomy, poverty is a massive injustice, as it strips millions of Americans of basic liberties. The statement may be ironic to some, considering the justification for poverty tends to be the following premise: poverty is bad, but addressing it any meaningful way would require big government to come in and violate the freedom and autonomy of citizens. And, as demonstrated earlier, the appeal of market triumphalism is that it assumes all outcomes are the product of free and consensual choices.

This argument has its roots in debates regarding the pros and cons of paternalism and anarchy. The rationale goes like this: it would be wildly unjust to have the government place any sort of guardrails to protect those in poverty, because it would come at the cost of freedom and autonomy of citizens – which the United States' unrestrained markets are an extension of. Furthermore, the government shouldn't be in the business of bailing people out of wrong choices – it's more important that people make their own choices and not have the government depersonalize them and righteously treat them like children.⁴⁹

The issue with this is it presumes that the freedom and autonomy of citizens can only be violated by the government. It can fairly be argued that large companies and corporations have actually become far more powerful and dangerous forms of unelected,

⁴⁹ Kleinig, J., & Brody, B. A. (1999). Two Arguments for State Paternalism. In G. Sher (Ed.), *Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Readings*. essay, Harcourt Brace.

tyrannical governments. Elizabeth Anderson, professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, argues in *Private Government, How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)*, that most modern workplaces are private governments.⁵⁰ Under current arrangements, we've made basic life necessities such as healthcare, food, water, shelter, and more as conditional on employers, as opposed to the government.

Instead of elected and accountable leaders being responsible for the food and shelter of many, we've outsourced the common good to Amazon and McDonalds. The result of this is that many of the United States' most impoverished communities are at the mercy of these companies – which dictate their wages, their speech, their bodily movements, dress code, hairstyles, email conversations, and political activity. By removing “big government” from the project of abolishing poverty, we haven't abolished tyranny. We've simply chosen a different tyrant.

A common rebuttal to this is one of negative liberty: if people work in unacceptable, low-wage, and exploitative conditions, they can simply seek a better option.⁵¹ In a market place that's completely absent of obstacles, barriers, or constraints, people have the freedom to choose to do whatever they wish. I would argue, however, that this line of thinking is extremely naive, because the low-wage worker may be on the verge of a home eviction, unable to pay for medical care for a life-threatening condition, or have a child that it needs to feed and provide for. The low-wage worker may be

⁵⁰ Anderson, Elizabeth. *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and why we don't talk about it)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

⁵¹ Carter, Ian, "Positive and Negative Liberty", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>.

lacking in skills to seek another job opportunity, or lack the social capital or educational pathway to gain more skills. Low-wage workers are often forced to make choices while a metaphorical gun is pointed at them, saying, “you can say no, but you will lack the basic necessities of food, shelter, or medical care if you attempt to seek a better option.” When we don’t care for those in poverty, we remove their ability to choose viable alternatives because taking the first and most available job is often a condition for survival.

Freedom and poverty can’t coexist under any circumstance, and Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen would agree. Sen has championed the idea that true freedom can only be attained when poverty is eradicated. In *Development As Freedom*, Sen says that, “...poverty, which robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger, or to achieve sufficient nutrition, or to obtain remedies for treatable illnesses, or the opportunity to be adequately clothed or sheltered, or to enjoy clean water or sanitary facilities.”⁵² By providing a baseline of social care for human beings, in the form of education or a financial safety net, people will have the capacity to exercise more freedoms, which they might not be able to exercise without government intervention.

Even John Stuart Mill, who isn’t exactly fond of paternalism, acknowledges that the government has some basic responsibilities – notably to protect the harm of others. According to Mill, it’s only acceptable to interfere with the liberty of citizens when the justification is self protection and to prevent the harm of others.⁵³ Government, therefore, should have reasonable grounds to provide basic social safety nets and protections, in order to prevent wide-scale exploitation by the marketplace.

⁵² Sen, A. (1999). *Development As Freedom*. Oxford University Press. Page 4.

⁵³ Mill, J.S, & Brody, B. A. (1999). *The Harm Principle*. In G. Sher (Ed.), *Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Readings*. essay, Harcourt Brace.

Freedom, however, is not the only lens at which we should examine the immorality of widespread inequality and poverty in the United States. A second key reason we have a moral obligation to address poverty has its roots in human rights – poverty violates the dignity of citizens and it’s an undemocratic social arrangement. None of this is to say that perfect equality is achievable or desirable. But it is to say that we should acknowledge the role of luck in our fate, and embrace some elements of Rawls’ theory of justice and place ourselves under a “veil of ignorance,” as we consider the ramifications and solutions to poverty.

Under a veil of ignorance, we should think about poverty as if we didn’t know anything about our identity or status, and determine what terms we would agree to. Not knowing anything about what group we would be placed into, knowing who our family is, what our social connections are, and recognizing that we could be part of the group that benefits the least, would we desire to live in the United States? Would we agree to have limited access to affordable housing, medical care that’s contingent on the workplace, or schools and inner cities that are historically and presently divided by race and class?

Better yet, would we agree to the widespread exploitation that low-income Americans face for the majority of their lives? The answer to this is likely a resounding no. It would be foolish to take a gamble, and be the unlucky recipient of some of the worst living conditions in the western world – the price of being born into poverty in the United States. This is not to say that Rawls’ theory of justice is free of flaw – it’s been fairly criticized for removing arguments of the common good from public debate. Rawls’ response to this criticism, however, illustrates why it can be the most useful tool to assess

when freedom should be restricted: the public conception of justice should be political, not metaphysical.⁵⁴ And poverty is inescapably a question of political justice.

Finally, if arguments of freedom or arguments of democracy and equality aren't compelling, there's a third reason we should feel a deep moral obligation to addressing the current state of poverty: trapping the poor, in order to subsidize the rich, is a cruel and uninspiring end goal for our country. Justice isn't justice about maximizing freedom, or acknowledging the role of luck in our fate by creating equal opportunity. It involves deliberating about the common good. Aristotle would say we should determine our end goal as a country, and determine the actions that are needed to achieve that goal.⁵⁵

From this vantage point, justice is teleological and honorific. It's teleological in the sense that it requires us to determine the purpose, end, or essential nature of the social practice in question, and it's honorific in the sense that justice requires us to determine what virtues should be honored or rewarded.⁵⁶ If there's still uncertainty as to whether or not we have a moral obligation to addressing poverty, consider this question: as the wealthiest nation in the world, is the United States' current socio-economic arrangement the most honorable one? When examining the amount of suffering that exists, is this the best that the United States and those in power can do, or is it the best that the privileged majority want to do?

When there are plans to block affordable housing projects, break-up organized labor, keep the minimum wage low, make healthcare a commodified luxury, or organized

⁵⁴ Rawls, J., & Brody, B. A. (1999). Justice As Fairness, Political Not Metaphysical. In G. Sher (Ed.), *Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Readings*. essay, Harcourt Brace.

⁵⁵ Hall, E. (2020). *Aristotle's Way: How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life*. Penguin. Page 67.

⁵⁶ Michael Sandel, *Justice, What's The Right Thing to Do?* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 10011), Page 186.

efforts to oppose social safety nets, is virtue and the common good the primary motive? Or is it something else? If this seems judgemental, Michael Sandel would say that justice is inescapably judgemental. He would say that justice is not just about the right way to distribute things, but rather it's about the right way to value things.⁵⁷ Eradicating poverty isn't just about the size or distribution of gross domestic product. It's about citizenship, sacrifice, and service. It's about civic virtue.

One critical civic virtue is compassion, and it's often one of the primary drivers of virtue-based arguments for aid to impoverished communities, and arguments in favor of redistributive policies. Compassion takes place when we look into the eyes of our fellow citizens and see ourselves. It can start with sympathy, or the ability to resonate with others feelings. Other times, compassion is aroused by empathy or pity. Yet, what makes compassion different from any of these feelings is that it's associated with action. It's deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it.⁵⁸ Rawls and Kant created brilliant logical models to make the case for compassion. The veil of ignorance and Kant's appeal to the universality of an action forces people to ponder: "would I want someone to do this to me?" Though compassion isn't always logical. It often requires letting go of the ego, and declaring that the good of others holds the same value and importance as one's own.

Another civic virtue is humility, which requires humbly acknowledging the role of luck in our fate, and that much of what we have received – both as individuals and as a collective society – is underserved. On an individual level, that may require recognition

⁵⁷ Michael Sandel, *Justice, What's The Right Thing to Do?* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 10011), Page 261.

⁵⁸ "The American Heritage Dictionary Entry: Compassion," American Heritage Dictionary Entry: compassion, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=compassion>.

that one was afforded the opportunity to go to a decent school, while another had more limited options, and had to go to a school with crumbling infrastructure. It may require acknowledging that one grew up in a caring and stable home, with attentive and available parents, while another grew up in a home feeling deeply lonely, isolated, and unnurtured. On a societal level, that may require recognition of the historic injustices, such as colonialism, sexism, and slavery. Aid to impoverished communities, particularly through redistribution, is a humble and radical act of penance. It acknowledges our shared sins and injustices as a country. While it may not be possible to right every wrong, one can confidently name and recognize the ways in which we have benefitted, intentionally or not, by the suffering of others. No one is deserving of the suffering they endure, and no one is deserving of the glory they receive.

However, perhaps one of the highest civic virtues is sacrificial and unconditional love – the kind that fuels the solidarity and sense of community that strong democracies require. According to Sandel, “it must find a way to cultivate in citizens a concern for the whole, a dedication to the common good.”⁵⁹ If solidarity is the desired condition, inequality is the virus. In a society as unequal as the United States, it’s fair to question how it can cultivate the solidarity and sense of mutual responsibility that a democracy requires. Sandel says, “as inequality deepens, rich and poor live increasingly separate lives. The affluent send their children to private schools (or public schools in wealthy suburbs), leaving urban public schools to the children of families having no alternative.”⁶⁰ Poverty isn’t just about lacking access to basic necessities that dictate the quality of life.

⁵⁹ Michael Sandel, *Justice, What’s The Right Thing to Do?* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 10011), Page 263.

⁶⁰ Michael Sandel, *Justice, What’s The Right Thing to Do?* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 10011), Page 266.

For Sandel, poverty creates a country that becomes growingly separate, and growingly unequal by the day – a highly undesirable end goal for a country as vast and diverse as the United States. In Sandel’s ideal world, policies that aim to combat poverty would tax the affluent to rebuild public institutions, in an effort to promote a more common life among citizens.

JUSTIFICATION FOR FEDERAL ACTION

There is great economic, political, and moral interest in addressing poverty and inequality. Yet, before even attempting to determine what policies should be implemented as a solution to the problem, there is a key question to be answered. While the current state of poverty may be bad, why should the government have a role in addressing poverty, and why is it the government's role to address the issue?

Government intervention is unavoidably a debate of paternalism versus anarchy, and it's a debate the United States has engaged in since its founding. Bruce Ackerman, a Sterling Professor of Law and Political Science at Yale Law School, says that, "so long as we live, there can be no escape from the struggle for power."⁶¹ The United States' founding fathers held two contradictory truths at once: government is good, and government is bad. Humans are extremely flawed, and by extension, so are the politicians that they vote for. James Madison famously stated, "What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary."⁶² Madison also went on to say in Federalist No. 51 that it's essential to have a state that promotes the good (since most will seek personal advantage above the common good), and also that individual liberty is fundamental to human flourishing, and the fullest realization of potential.

However, there's a challenge with the framework of the founding fathers: it's vague. They seem to plead for the need for a healthy balance between government and individual liberty, but balance is extremely subjective. In the United States at least,

⁶¹ Ackerman, B., & Brody, B. A. (1999). Constraints On Reasons for Exercising Power. In G. Sher (Ed.), *Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Readings*. essay, Harcourt Brace. Page 292.

⁶² Matthews, R. *If Men Were Angels: James Madison and the Heartless Empire of Reason*. University Press of Kansas. Retrieved May 13, 2022, from <https://kansaspress.ku.edu/978-0-7006-0643-6.html>

“balance” has often meant opposition to redistribution or government intervention in addressing poverty on the grounds that it violates freedom. The logic is that even though someone might make a wrong choice, what matters is that it’s their choice, and when the state violates autonomy, it depersonalizes citizens and righteously treats them like children.⁶³

I would argue, however, that government intervention is absolutely necessary to addressing poverty. The first reason is when the government doesn’t act, power vacuums open for individuals or companies – which often do not have the common good as their primary motive. James Madison didn’t just warn of the dangers of giving the government too much power. Madison warned of giving anyone too much power, saying, “whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.”⁶⁴

Without government intervention, the default is that it allows unelected billionaires and corporations to emerge as the new tyrants – consolidating enormous amounts of power. And the interests of those corporations and billionaires aren’t the common good. Their interest is in making a profit. Profit and growth, as mentioned earlier, often require further exploitation of those in poverty. It’s why income inequality is widening in the first place.

Even to the individual that finds arguments of freedom more compelling, autonomy is ultimately at stake when “ambition does not counteract ambition.” Without racial discrimination laws, which protect the rights of racial minorities, the autonomy of

⁶³ Kleinig, J., & Brody, B. A. (1999). Two Arguments for State Paternalism. In G. Sher (Ed.), *Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Readings*. essay, Harcourt Brace.

⁶⁴ Guinier, L., & Brody, B. A. (1999). Persistent Minorities and Fairness. In G. Sher (Ed.), *Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Readings*. essay, Harcourt Brace.

millions of Americans could be infringed upon. Without gender discrimination laws, which protect the rights and autonomy of women, the autonomy of millions of Americans could be infringed upon. Paternalism can increase the autonomy of citizens, by suppressing the suffocating passions of others.

The rebuttal to this often goes something like this: allowing the government to have so much power is ripe for corruption, bureaucracy, and mismanagement. It's often implied or assumed that more government means greater risk of tyranny. I would argue, however, that in a society as vastly unequal as the United States, tyranny already exists. The balance of power has fallen extremely lopsided, in favor of those with wealth, high education, and privilege. The growing inequality in the United States, along with the rise of populism and anti-elite backlash are symptoms of this.

The second is that the government has a responsibility to cultivate virtuous life in the citizenry, along with the ability to reason about the common good and make rational decisions.⁶⁵ This includes addressing societal issues such as poverty, which impedes not only individual welfare but also hampers collective moral and civic growth. Social welfare spending is not merely an act of charity but a strategic investment in the nation's moral and intellectual capital. Robert George further captures this view, saying, "...legal coercion can help put people into shape to appreciate the value of moral uprightness by settling them down and habituating them to virtue."⁶⁶ Having a certain degree of paternalism, where an elected official makes decisions to promote this livelihood for citizens, encourages active engagement in politics, morality and civic life. By ensuring

⁶⁵ Clayton, E. (n.d.). Aristotle: Politics. Internet encyclopedia of philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/aristotle-politics/>

⁶⁶ George, R., & Brody, B. A. (1999). Government and Character. In G. Sher (Ed.), *Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Readings*. essay, Harcourt Brace.

that basic needs like healthcare and housing are met, the government creates a stable environment conducive to active political engagement and moral development.

Critics often argue that such intervention can lead to tyranny, with the government encroaching on personal freedoms under the guise of virtue promotion. This concern, while valid, overlooks the difference between oppressive control and constructive, responsible governance. The objective should not be to dictate morality or curtail freedoms, but instead to create conditions where citizens can act with greater freedom to exercise virtue and engage in ethical reasoning and civic participation. For example, policies that protect workers' hours, raise the minimum wage, or provide a free college education to all could foster more time and commitment for civic responsibility and moral reasoning without overstepping democratic principles or individual rights.

Finally, government intervention on poverty works. Among OECD countries, the United States in 2021 had poverty rates closely aligned with Turkey, Estonia, and Korea – among some of the higher poverty rates of listed countries.⁶⁷ Countries with poverty rates below 10 percent, including Switzerland, Sweden, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, Denmark, and Finland, alternatively place a greater emphasis on having government intervention in poverty, through welfare spending and social programs. According to the World Economic Forum, three of the countries that were just listed – France, Belgium, and Finland – rank among the top of the world in Welfare spending as a share of GDP.⁶⁸ Every single one of the countries listed has universal

⁶⁷ Rep. Poverty Rates in OECD Countries as of 2021. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, August 29, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/233910/poverty-rates-in-oecd-countries/#:~:text=On%20the%20other%20end%20of, followed%20by%20Finland%20and%20Denmark.&text=The%20OECD%2C%20or%20the%20Organisation.up%20of%2038%20member%20countries.>

⁶⁸ Katharina Buchholz, “These Countries Spend the Most, and the Least, on Social Benefits,” *World Economic Forum*, February 10, 2021,

healthcare.⁶⁹ Most of the countries have much more generous parental leave laws, and other laws that protect workers from exploitation.⁷⁰ As of this writing, all of these countries are not only still standing. They're thriving, in the sense that citizens in poverty have far better living conditions than the United States.

An argument against this approach might suggest that there is a great economic burden that comes with increased welfare spending, and there's potential for such interventions to stifle economic growth. This might be through high taxes, discouraged investment, and dwindling work ethic. However, the experience of the aforementioned countries counters this argument, showing that well-structured and efficient social programs that target poverty can be highly successful. These nations demonstrate that it is possible to balance robust welfare programs with dynamic economies. Through the kinds of policies that invest in human capital, education, and health, it's clear that well-designed social spending programs can catapult economic growth, rather than stifle it.

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/02/social-spending-highest-lowest-country-comparison-oecd-france-economics-politics-welfare/>.

⁶⁹ "New York State Department of Health," Foreign Countries with Universal Health Care, accessed November 18, 2023, https://www.health.ny.gov/regulations/hcra/univ_hlth_care.htm.

⁷⁰ "Five Countries with the Best Labor and Employment Laws for Workers' Rights," web log, Oyster (blog) (Oyster Library, November 2, 2022), <https://www.oysterhr.com/library/five-countries-with-the-best-labor-and-employment-laws-for-workers-rights>.

EXPANDED WELFARE AS A SOLUTION

Poverty and inequality are a pervasive problem, the United States has an economic, political, and philosophical interest in addressing it, and government intervention on the issue is justifiable. Yet, a final step remains, what are the exact policies that will maximize freedom and citizenship for those facing disadvantage, and build the communal muscles of the American citizenry? We saw a prominent example of how this could be achieved during the COVID-19 pandemic, where welfare expansion drastically improved conditions for those in poverty. When COVID-19 first struck, millions of Americans filed for unemployment insurance, and the economy was in a freefall⁷¹, but the federal government responded boldly. The federal government expanded the time laid-off workers could collect unemployment⁷² and added additional assistance such as stimulus checks, rental assistance⁷³, and expansion of the Child Tax Credit was also provided.⁷⁴ The result of this was that during the worst economic downturn in nearly 100 years, poverty did not increase, and it instead fell precipitously. There were millions of Americans no longer living in poverty.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Catherine Thorbecke, “6.6 Million More Americans File for Unemployment amid COVID-19 Financial Crisis,” ABC News, April 9, 2020.

⁷² Louise Sheiner and Manuel Alcalá Kovalski, “How Does Unemployment Insurance Work? And How Is It Changing during the Coronavirus Pandemic?,” web log, *Brookings Institution* (blog), July 20, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-does-unemployment-insurance-work-and-how-is-it-changing-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

⁷³ “Emergency Rental Assistance Program,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 8, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/emergency-rental-assistance-program>.

⁷⁴ “The Child Tax Credit,” The White House, November 17, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/child-tax-credit/#:~:text=The%20American%20Rescue%20Plan%2C%20signed,increased%20from%20%242%2C000%20to%20%243%2C000>.

⁷⁵ “Monthly Poverty Data,” Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/forecasting-monthly-poverty-data>.

These programs were eventually ended, due to false narratives that they cause labor shortages, despite studies that were done finding no evidence that unemployment benefits caused workers to stay home.⁷⁶ Furthermore, there were stereotypes perpetuated that welfare makes impoverished communities poor and unmotivated, despite evidence that those receiving assistance typically spend their income on necessities such as housing and food.⁷⁷

Federal action can significantly address poverty, and I would argue that there are three key pillars based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs that are necessary to accomplish this vision. According to Maslow, some of the most essential needs that human beings have are food, water, shelter, rest, and physical safety.⁷⁸ Once those basic needs for survival are met, there's a psychological need for social connection – often referred to in sociology as social capital. We can meet these needs through federal action. We've done it in past eras, such as the progressive era and New-Deal eras, and the United States can again.

Housing

First, the United States needs to meet basic needs by giving those in poverty more options and choice through expanded social safety nets that target basic needs: including expanded housing access to provide shelter and water. Choice is the antidote to

⁷⁶ Dana Scott and Joseph Altonji et al, "Employment Effects of Unemployment Insurance Generosity During the Pandemic," Yale University, July 14, 2020, [https://tobin.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/C-19%20Articles/CARESUL_identification_vF\(1\).pdf](https://tobin.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/C-19%20Articles/CARESUL_identification_vF(1).pdf).

⁷⁷ Gennetian, Lisa A, Jordan Conwell, and Becca Daniels. Rep. How Do Low-Income Families Spend Their Money? Econofact, November 15, 2021. <https://econofact.org/how-do-low-income-families-spend-their-money>.

⁷⁸ Saul Mcleod, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory," Simply Psychology, October 24, 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

exploitation. And social safety nets, generally speaking, provide more options and a wider range of options for those in poverty. So let's set a goal: by 2040, let's ensure every American has access to adequate housing.

Unfortunately, the United States is not on track to achieve that goal just yet. Between December 2017 and September 2022, the median rent for newly leased units rose nearly 32 percent – a historic increase.⁷⁹ Limited affordable housing doesn't just deprive millions of Americans of a basic need for survival, create instability, or deplete possible savings for those that need savings most. Housing instability can negatively impact one's ability to maintain employment⁸⁰, and create negative spillovers in neighborhoods.⁸¹

One solution often proposed is investing in rental assistance expansions for low-income earners, with the goal of giving people more choice of where to live and the opportunity to reduce segregation of people with low incomes. The only issue with this is that the housing market often recoups the gains workers make – rent prices have exceeded income gains by approximately 325 percent since 1985.⁸²

Rental assistance may be a necessary bandaid, but more needs to be done to address poverty at its roots. I would argue that there are two ways that this can be

⁷⁹ Bailey, Peggy. Rep. Addressing the Affordable Housing Crisis Requires Expanding Rental Assistance and Adding Housing Units. Center on Budget Policy and Priorities, October 27, 2022. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/addressing-the-affordable-housing-crisis-requires-expanding-rental-assistance-and>.

⁸⁰ Matthew Desmond, Carl Gershenson, Housing and Employment Insecurity among the Working Poor, *Social Problems*, Volume 63, Issue 1, February 2016, Pages 46–67, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spv025>

⁸¹ Jenny Schuetz, Vicki Been, Ingrid Gould Ellen, Neighborhood effects of concentrated mortgage foreclosures, *Journal of Housing Economics*, Volume 17, Issue 4, 2008, Pages 306-319, ISSN 1051-1377, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhe.2008.09.004>.

⁸² Matthew Desmond, *Poverty*, by America (London: Allen Lane, 2023), Page 137.

accomplished, and both are ideas championed by poverty expert and Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond. First is to strengthen the commitment to the affordable housing programs that the United States already has. Children who grow up in subsidized housing are healthier and do better in school compared to those living unassisted.⁸³ Expansion of affordable housing, coupled with programs that tap the economic gains from rising real estate values, could go a long way towards expanding affordable opportunities for low-income families.⁸⁴

The second, and more ambitious project I would argue in favor of, is expanding opportunities for individuals in poverty to become homeowners. This is an admittedly challenging project, in that banks don't always finance affordable homes. In 2019, roughly 2.1 million homes were bought for less than 100,000, but only 23 percent of those purchased were done with a mortgage.⁸⁵ Banks avoid issuing smaller mortgages in part because they're less profitable, since interest on a \$10 million dollar home brings in more money than interest in a \$100,000 home.

What could be done, however, is for the United States government to provide additional financing to create pathways for first time homeowners – something that's already had great success in some rural communities. A program known as the 502 Direct Loan program provides USDA secured loans that cover the entire cost of the mortgage, so no down payment is needed. They also come with extremely low interest rates. Expanding these programs nation-wide would be a significant step towards creating

⁸³ Matthew Desmond, *Poverty, by America* (London: Allen Lane, 2023), Page 144.

⁸⁴ Michela Zonta, rep., *Expanding the Supply of Affordable Housing for Low-Wage Workers* (Center for American Progress, August 10, 2020), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/expanding-supply-affordable-housing-low-wage-workers/>.

⁸⁵ Matthew Desmond, *Poverty, by America* (London: Allen Lane, 2023), Page 145.

pathways to home ownership, and be a step towards repairing many of the historical injustices that excluded Black Americans from home ownership opportunities caused by redlining.

Healthcare

If every American has a place to live, that's a massive victory for the anti-poverty movement. But there's another critical step towards ensuring every human being's basic needs are met – and that involves access to medical care that's free of financial hardship and independent from employment status. So let's set a second goal: by 2040, let's ensure every American has access to adequate healthcare.

This is not to endorse any kind of healthcare system or policy platform specifically – there are healthcare and public policy experts that are likely far more equipped to navigate those complexities and nuances. Some may argue for a system similar to the United Kingdom or Spain, where healthcare, similar to public schools in the United States, is funded through tax payments provided by government-employed providers to all citizens. Others may argue for a system similar to Germany or France, financed jointly by employers and employees through payroll deduction to insurers that are nonprofits and cover everyone. There could also be those that argue for simple tweaks to the United States' model, or a hybrid of various systems to promote public competition in the industry. Regardless of one's method of choice, the most essential point to make is this – the most essential goal of public policy as it pertains to healthcare and the anti-poverty movement is to ensure all Americans, especially those in need, have access to medical care free of financial hardship. Currently, the United States has significant work to do to achieve this aspiration.

There are two main objections that are often made to the aspiration in question. First, is that healthcare that's free of financial burden is not a right, and not something that the government is obligated to pay for. While anyone should be permitted into a hospital, that doesn't guarantee the right to not pay the bill. Secondly, and by extension of the first principle, paying for healthcare for all Americans is an inefficient and wasteful use of taxpayer money.

Let's start with the first objection, regarding whether or not healthcare is a right, as opposed to a consumer good. The most essential human right is life, as it is the right in which all other rights depend on. Basic rights such as speech, consciousness, due process, and privacy cannot be exercised without the basic right to livelihood. In the United States, nearly 45,000 Americans of working age die each year because they lack health insurance.⁸⁶ To deny healthcare coverage to tens of millions of Americans each year is to knowingly be complicit in the death and suffering of thousands of Americans, who are denied their most fundamental human right, which is the right to life. Even if health coverage itself isn't a right, it's quantifiably linked to the ultimate right – which in and of itself holds moral value. It's the precise reason why the United States is justified to have existing laws that prevent drunk driving or taking weapons through airport security. Protection of life is valid grounds for federal action.

Charles E. Binkley, the director of Bioethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, argues that the debate over whether healthcare is a right or a privilege ultimately boils down to how much those with money are willing to give part of their money, to

⁸⁶ Andrew P. Wilper, Steffie Woolhandler, Karen E. Lasser, Danny McCormick, David H. Bor, and David U. Himmelstein, 2009: Health Insurance and Mortality in US Adults American Journal of Public Health 99, 2289_2295, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.157685>

reduce suffering and death.⁸⁷ Given the extraordinary wealth that the United States possesses, and is willing to spend on its military to protect the safety of the country, it's baffling that it's unwilling to spend what's needed to protect the thousands of Americans that die every year from lacking healthcare coverage. If the lives of citizens are not sufficient grounds for government spending, it's deeply unclear what is.

As to the second argument, that paying for healthcare is an inefficient and wasteful use of government dollars, that point overlooks the current inefficiencies in the U.S. health system. Consider this: in 2023, 26 million Americans were uninsured⁸⁸, and for those that were insured, the vast majority were dependent on their employer. In order to benefit from employer-sponsored health insurance, you need a good job and one that generally requires a college degree. And while healthcare, on the surface appears to come from the employer, it's one of the largest tax breaks that exempts the cost from taxable incomes. So, in other words, the United States government is projected to spend trillions of dollars on employer-subsidized health insurance in 2023⁸⁹, which predominantly benefits middle-class, upper-class, and highly educated Americans, at the expense of denying it for millions of low-income Americans. It's one of the largest government programs, yet it doesn't serve the people that need it most. If one is to argue that any component of government subsidized healthcare is wasteful, this point seems to curiously

⁸⁷ Charles E Binkley, "A Right or a Privilege? How to Practically and Ethically Reconcile Two Opposing Views of Health Care," web log, Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (blog) (Santa Clara University, December 7, 2020), <https://www.scu.edu/ethics-spotlight/post-election-reconciliation/a-right-or-a-privilege-how-to-practically-and-ethically-reconcile-two-opposing-views-of-health-care/>.

⁸⁸ Keisler-Starkey, Katherine, Lisa N Bunch, and Rachel A Lindstrom. Rep. United States Census Bureau. United States of America, September 12, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-281.html>.

⁸⁹ Jessica Hale and Emily Vreeland, rep., Federal Subsidies for Health Insurance: 2023 to 2033 (United States Congressional Budget Office, September 28, 2023), <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/59273>.

be ignored. If the United States exerted as much energy providing healthcare to those in poverty as it did to those with well paying white collar jobs, we'd be able to successfully promote earlier intervention, improve overall public health, and decrease the economic strain associated with inadequate care across the country.⁹⁰

Worker Protections

Social spending, however, is not the only way to ensure that basic needs are met, and as a country, it may not be feasible, nor necessarily desirable to simply spend our way out of this problem. This leads to the third pillar of anti-poverty policy: we need innovative guardrails that protect workers, in order to ensure all Americans have easy access to the food, water, shelter, rest, and physical safety that's needed. By 2040, let's ensure workers receive more out of the products of their labor.

This can first be done with regular raises to the minimum wage, because good things generally happen when impoverished communities receive a raise. The most notable positive outcome is that it dramatically improves health. Higher minimum wages have been proven to reduce adolescent birth rates, particularly among non-Hispanic White and Hispanic adolescents. Lindsey Rose Bullinger, an Assistant Professor in the School of Public Policy at Georgia Tech, found that a \$1 increase in the real minimum wage reduces adolescent birth rates by roughly 2%.⁹¹ A separate study found that if all states in 2014 had increased their minimum wages by \$1 dollar there would likely have

⁹⁰ Zieff, Gabriel, Zachary Y. Kerr, Justin B. Moore, and Lee Stoner. 2020. "Universal Healthcare in the United States of America: A Healthy Debate" *Medicina* 56, no. 11: 580. <https://doi.org/10.3390/medicina56110580>

⁹¹ Lindsey Rose Bullinger, 2017: The Effect of Minimum Wages on Adolescent Fertility: A Nationwide Analysis *American Journal of Public Health* 107, 447_452, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303604>

been an estimated 2790 fewer low birth weight births and 518 fewer postneonatal deaths for the year.⁹²

The common refrain that's made from the staunch libertarian goes something like this: the person that's confined to a minimum wage job should pull themselves up from their boot straps. They should make better decisions with their money, get a better job, or overall just make better choices. They embrace the meritocratic hubris mentioned earlier, which is that the economic hardship one faces is always deserved and always the product of wrong choices.

I've already established why that latter point is misplaced, but to address the first point – that impoverished individuals should simply make better choices – it's really difficult to make better choices when you're completely deprived of happiness. Imagine working an 80 hour work week and being sleep deprived, depressed, stressed, and having work rob you of the time and brain power that you would need to make better choices. If anyone truly believes that impoverished individuals need to merely “make better choices,” then I cannot think of anything more impactful than raising wages for those that are being exploited, if better decisions are desired. Rather than ask people to make better choices to improve working conditions, we should improve working conditions to allow better choices.

According to a paper from Wharton Business School, raising the minimum wage tends to have small impacts on employment, while drastically improving quality of life in the form of increased incomes for workers.⁹³ In a separate study from the Center for

⁹² Kelli A. Komro, Melvin D. Livingston, Sara Markowitz, and Alexander C. Wagenaar, 2016: The Effect of an Increased Minimum Wage on Infant Mortality and Birth Weight American Journal of Public Health 106, 1514_1516, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303268>

⁹³ Thomas Winberry and Shankar Parameshwaran, “Why Raising the Minimum Wage Has Short-Term Benefits but Long-Term Costs,” Knowledge at Wharton, June 20, 2023,

American Progress, “a \$15 minimum wage would also help reduce stubborn gender, racial, and ethnic wage gaps for women, Black, and Latino workers, who are overrepresented among those earning less than \$15 per hour.”⁹⁴

A raise can’t be the only thing that transpires, however. As of this writing, it has been 14 years since the \$7.25 federal minimum wage was last raised – marking the longest period in history without an increase. It’s therefore not hard to understand why there’s constant talk of a lack of wage growth. Due to annual inflation rates, it’s not just that impoverished communities have not been given a raise – they’ve essentially been given a pay cut. Once the minimum wage is raised, it should increase every year based on a formula that accounts for inflation.

Secondly, the United States government should also outlaw intimidation and anti-competitive practices by companies, such as non-competes. While there are other intimidation and anti-competitive practices companies use to bully low-wage workers, non-competes are among the most predatory – even for higher wage workers. In 2016, for example, the Jimmy John’s sandwich chain had workers and delivery drivers sign non-compete agreements prohibiting them from working at any establishment within a two-mile radius of a Jimmy John’s location that made more than 10% of its revenue from sandwiches, for a period of two years.

Jimmy John’s eventually reached a settlement with the New York Attorney General office, as New York law does not permit non-compete agreements. The Attorney

<https://doi.org/https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/why-raising-the-minimum-wage-has-short-term-benefits-but-long-term-costs/#:~:text=They%20found%20that%20in%20the,the%20size%20of%20its%20increase.>

⁹⁴ Rose Khattar, Sara Estep, and Lily Roberts, “Raising the Minimum Wage Would Be an Investment in Growing the Middle Class,” web log, Center for American Progress (blog), July 20, 2023, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/raising-the-minimum-wage-would-be-an-investment-in-growing-the-middle-class/>.

General at the time said, “Non-compete agreements for low-wage workers are unconscionable. They limit mobility and opportunity for vulnerable workers and bully them into staying with the threat of being sued.”⁹⁵ Non-competes shouldn’t just be prohibited in New York. They should be prohibited everywhere in the country.

The argument in favor of them is that they need to exist to protect “innovation.” A tech company, such as Apple for example, may have a non-compete agreement with a worker to ensure that their technology is protected and doesn’t get shared with a competitor. This, however, is the precise opposite of innovation, and as the term “non-compete” implies, it stifles economic competition and mobility. Innovation takes place in dynamic markets, where individuals are able to start new companies with ease. Not when industries become monopolized, or knowledge sharing – a key pillar of innovation – is limited.

Finally, the federal government should also provide greater safeguards on the human need for rest, and make workplaces more community congenial by shortening work weeks, expanding vacation time, and expanding paternity leave. As mentioned previously, rest is one of the most essential physiological needs on the pyramid, on the same level as food and water. Thomas Jefferson wrote that, “It’s neither wealth nor splendor, but tranquility and occupation, which give happiness.”⁹⁶

⁹⁵ “A.G. Schneiderman Announces Settlement With Jimmy John’s To Stop Including Non-Compete Agreements In Hiring Packets,” Office of the New York State Attorney General, June 22, 2016, Office of the New York State Attorney General, <https://ag.ny.gov/press-release/2016/ag-schneiderman-announces-settlement-jimmy-johns-stop-including-non-compete>.

⁹⁶ “From Thomas Jefferson to Anna Jefferson Marks, 12 July 1788,” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-13-02-0254>. [Original source: The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, vol. 13, March–7 October 1788, ed. Julian P. Boyd. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956, p. 350.]

Alex Soojung-Kim Pang's book *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less* demonstrates that rest is not the opposite of work, because it's a critical partner to accomplishing great work.⁹⁷ Yet, despite the benefits that rest has on mental health, productivity, creativity, and decision-making, the OECD shows that U.S. workers, on average, work approximately 300 more hours than workers in the United Kingdom or France.⁹⁸ The country with more poverty is simultaneously working more, with fewer protections on the human need for rest.

Social Capital

Finally, once we've addressed the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, there's a higher need to be met. We need to take the social capital of the most disadvantaged communities seriously. By 2040, let's ensure that high-poverty communities receive greater investment in social capital.

Social capital or social capital theory, as outlined in Robert Putnam's classic *Bowling Alone*, is the idea that social networks have value. Just as a hammer provides physical capital, or a college education serves as human capital, social contracts also impact the productivity and happiness of individuals and groups.⁹⁹ Research from Hanna Love at the Brookings Institute draws attention to how neighborhood attachment and social cohesion are associated with lower violent crime rates.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2018).

⁹⁸ "Average Annual Hours Actually Worked per Worker," OECD.Stat, accessed November 19, 2023, <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DataSetCode=ANHRS>.

⁹⁹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Page 19.

¹⁰⁰ Hanna Love, rep., *Want to Reduce Violence? Invest In Place*. (The Brookings Institution, November 16, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/want-to-reduce-violence-invest-in-place/>.

We can start by building the social groundwork in school districts with higher rates of poverty. Participation in extracurricular activities is a proven means to improving civic and social involvement later in life.¹⁰¹ However, there are other measures that should and can be taken, to improve the quality of community relationships and integration. Notably, we should make place-based investments that restore the public spaces and public goods that have been abandoned for the last 50 years. This requires well-funded and well-planned urban and metropolitan design, focused on pedestrian-friendly areas and public spaces that encourage socializing.

The benefits of pedestrian friendly streets and public spaces are well documented. Research from the Brookings Institution shows, “increasing the number of spaces for informal contact between neighbors is linked to a greater sense of safety for people in urban areas. This speaks to the importance of investing in “third places”—such as parks, cafes, community centers, and restaurants—within areas that disproportionately lack access to them as a means to further the social cohesion that helps prevent crime.”¹⁰² The benefits of investing in public transit are also well-documented. Public transit supports social capital, as it creates a shared and common space among citizens. Yet, public transportation can also boost the economic opportunities of disadvantaged communities, most notably by improving job access by expanding potential mobility.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Page 405.

¹⁰² Hanna Love, rep., *Want to Reduce Violence? Invest In Place*. (The Brookings Institution, November 16, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/want-to-reduce-violence-invest-in-place/>.

¹⁰³ Roderick Taylor and Chye-Ching Huang, rep., *Any Federal Infrastructure Package Should Boost Investment in Low-Income Communities* (Center On Budget Policy and Priorities, June 28, 2019), <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-budget/any-federal-infrastructure-package-should-boost-investment-in-low-income>.

Critics might argue that investments in social capital are expensive and public spaces may divert necessary funds from other direct anti-poverty initiatives. While these concerns are valid, it's crucial to understand that social capital investments are not merely additional costs but foundational investments that yield long-term societal benefits, including reduced crime rates and enhanced economic opportunities. By improving the quality of life and connectivity within communities, we indirectly but substantially address poverty itself. Rather than giving up on the project of making these investments due to their cost, a more inspiring vision includes social capital investments made with robust community engagement, transparent reporting, and interventions that meet the specific needs of residents.

While the task is daunting, the integration of social capital improvements into poverty alleviation strategies is crucial. By investing in the social infrastructure of our most disadvantaged communities, we do not just enhance their landscapes—we fundamentally strengthen their potential for resilience and prosperity. This holistic approach to tackling poverty, which includes both addressing immediate material needs and investing in long-term social assets, is essential for creating sustainable and inclusive growth.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The persistence of poverty and inequality in the United States – which have often been justified by myths of welfare dependency, “free market” thinking and utilitarianism – are an economically inefficient, immoral, and politically unstable arrangement. Poverty defies economic logic by preventing millions of workers from maximizing their fullest talents, ignores negative economic externalities, and disregards the law of diminishing marginal utility. Poverty erodes political life by diluting public goods and fueling meritocratic hubris – which by extension leads to populist resentment. Finally, poverty violates moral logic by stripping millions of Americans of freedom, disregarding democratic human rights, and rotting civic virtue.

As such, federal action is urgently needed on more robust social programs that target poverty, such as affordable housing, universal healthcare, greater worker protections, and greater social capital investments in high poverty communities. However, when these kinds of solutions are discussed, one of the most common refrains comes in the form of a doubtful and skeptical question: “where will we get the money?” It’s a question people often ask, as if lower poverty rates are something that can only be achieved on distant planets. There are, in fact, many ways anti-poverty programs could be financed. The most obvious one that’s been proposed in some shape or form by many Democratic lawmakers is increasing income taxes on high earners. The top marginal tax rate in 1940 was 81.10 percent, 84.36 percent in 1950, 91 percent in 1960.¹⁰⁴ Even during the Ronald Reagan Presidency, an administration that was known for lowering taxes, the top marginal tax rate never dipped below 50 percent. Yet, something changed during

¹⁰⁴ “Historical Highest Marginal Income Tax Rates,” Tax Policy Center, May 11, 2023, <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/statistics/historical-highest-marginal-income-tax-rates>.

George H.W. Bush’s administration. For the first time since the onset of the Great Depression, taxes on the highest earners dipped to their lowest levels in history, and we have been in a race to the bottom ever since. If we want to alleviate the suffering of the tens of millions of Americans living in poverty, there’s no way around it. We need to return to what the United States did for half of a century, and increase the top marginal rate on income taxes.

There’s another layer, however, to ensuring some of the wealthiest Americans contribute to addressing poverty. And that’s through ensuring they actually pay their taxes. One estimate shows collecting unpaid federal income taxes from the top 1 percent of households would generate approximately \$175 billion a year.¹⁰⁵ That money alone, even independent of raising the top marginal tax rate, would strike a massive blow to poverty’s core.

Finally, poverty is too urgent of an issue to not pay the price of abolishing it. The fact that poverty inflicts suffering on tens of millions of Americans is an embarrassment to a country that prides itself as the land of economic opportunity. Over the course of the last several decades, poverty has gone unchanged, in large part due to a selfish individualism that opposes collective action to empower the poor, end exploitation, and rectification of historic injustices.

Poverty will not be abolished through the magic of the marketplace, nor will it be abolished through individual generosity. It has not done so over the last 40 years – it has instead deepened inequality, and made little to no improvement in the lives of those in poverty. Poverty and inequality can only be addressed through collective action – a mass

¹⁰⁵ John Guyton et al., “Tax Evasion at the Top of the Income Distribution: Theory and Evidence,” National Bureau of Economic Research, March 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w28542>. Page 4.

movement akin to the way unions demanded labor laws in the 20th century, or the way social safety nets were radically expanded during the Great Depression.

This isn't just an issue for those facing poverty or disadvantage. It's a concern for everyone – everyone that seeks dignity for all, increased social connectedness, and more lively civic participation. There's undoubtedly a long list of challenges facing the United States, but none is greater than the fact that tens of millions in our midst lack basic needs, while others have enough money to playfully launch rockets into outer space. Poverty kills freedom, poverty kills creativity, and poverty kills the maximization of talent and potential. It's unfathomably destructive, and it can only be abolished through a commitment to policies, supported by collected buy-in from citizens, that eradicate the conditions that allow poverty to exist in the first place.

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Vita

Name	<i>Thomas St. Hilaire</i>
Baccalaureate Degree	<i>Bachelor of Arts, Syracuse University, Syracuse Major: Political Science and Public Relations</i>
Date Graduated	<i>May, 2019</i>