

Statement of
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before the
Budget Committee
United States House of Representatives

“Poverty in America: Economic Realities of Struggling Families”

June 19, 2019

Thank you, Chairman Yarmuth, Ranking Member Womack and members of this committee, for this opportunity to speak here today.

I come to you this morning as an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church, a biblical scholar, and someone who has been organizing with the poor and homeless for the past 25 years, starting with the National Union of the Homeless and the National Welfare Rights Union, and today with the *Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*.

I come to this work not just because it's right but because it's necessary. I have been without health care, have struggled with inadequate housing, have worked low-wage jobs throughout my life. And as a mother of two children who go to a public school in New York City where 65% of the kids are living below the poverty line, with family and friends who rely on public health insurance, and surrounded by many in my community who simply can't make ends meet, I believe we can come together and make life better for our children.

Over the past two and a half years, the *Poor People's Campaign* has built coordinating committees of poor and dispossessed people, moral leaders, advocates and activists in 40 states. We have met with tens of thousands of people and chronicled their demands for a better society.

We have spent time in:

my home state of Wisconsin, where the safety net has been shredded over the past decade, and families are going without heat and electricity even in cold winters.

Lowndes County, Alabama, where families have no access to sanitation services and are living with raw sewage in their yards, precipitating a health care crisis where tropical diseases are showing up in the rural south;

Crossett, Arkansas, where a whole town was poisoned by a paper, chemical and plywood plant and grandparents meet their grandchildren 80 miles outside of town to protect them from the toxins;

It includes Pacoima, California, where one in four children at Telfair elementary school are homeless;

and Altoona, Pennsylvania, where children are being taken away from their parents because they can't afford to pay their water, utilities or rent.

Drawing from this deep engagement, we together developed a Moral Agenda to eliminate the evils of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy and militarism. These interrelated injustices have persisted — and in many cases grown even worse — over the past 50 years, since the original Poor People's Campaign in 1968.⁴

Many people tell us we are being far too ambitious — that our demands are politically impossible and too expensive. But this is just not true. The benefits of our Agenda by far outweigh the costs; in fact, it is the cost of continuing immoral policies and misguided priorities that we cannot afford.

You on this committee know that talk is cheap, ultimately it is our deeds that matter and come with a cost. Budgets reflect our deepest values and priorities. And we are here to say that our nation's budget as it now stands reflects the values of the rich, large corporations, and military contractors at the expense of the poor. We are here to say we need a moral revolution of values that instead places the needs and demands of the poor and the planet at the heart of our budget. This will create more jobs, build up our infrastructure, strengthen our economy, and protect our resources for future generations. This will redound to the benefit of all, instead of the few. When you lift from the bottom, everybody rises.

I know this from economics and social science but also I've read it in the Bible. In Deuteronomy it says that if you forgive debts, increase programs the lift up the poor, pay your workers a living wage, release those who are oppressed, and lend out money knowing you will not get paid back, then your whole society will flourish. God does not ordain poverty. The poor will only be with us as long as we are disobedient to God. Poverty is people's creation, it is the creation of immoral budgets and unjust policies and we can choose to end it.

A few examples from the "Poor People's Moral Budget," a new report we have co-published with the Institute for Policy Studies, demonstrate that:⁵

Child poverty costs our country \$700 million per year in long-term health, productivity, and other problems;⁶

⁴ Institute for Policy Studies, Poor People's Campaign, Repairers of the Breach, and the Kairos Center, "The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 Years After The Poor People's Campaign Challenged Racism, Poverty, The War Economy/Militarism, And Our National Morality," April 2018. <https://ips-dc.org/souls-of-poor-folks/>

⁵ Institute for Policy Studies and the Poor People's Campaign, "Poor People's Moral Budget: Everybody Has the Right to Live," June 17, 2019. ips-dc.org/report-moral-budget

⁶ Michael McLaughlin and Mark R. Rank, "Estimating the Economic Cost of Childhood Poverty in the United States," *Social Work Research* 42, no. 2 (June 2018): 73, <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svy007>.

Voter suppression has cost just one state at least \$385 million per year in administrative and court costs;

Failing to address climate change could cost up to 15.7% of GDP per year, wiping out the equivalent of \$3.3 trillion from our economy;

And our endless wars and 800 military bases cost hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars and do not make our world any safer.

Instead, we could cut \$350 billion per year from the Pentagon budget to spend on real security at home — and we'd still have a larger military budget than China, Russia, and Iran combined.

We could raise the federal minimum wage to a living wage and experience a ripple effect as that money is circulated back through the economy, faster and further than the billions Congress gave the rich and corporations through tax cuts;

We could gain \$886 billion in estimated annual revenue from fair taxes on the wealthy, corporations, and Wall Street;

We could invest in public infrastructure and create more jobs outside of the military that could speed a clean energy transition that would be good for our country and the planet;⁷

We could provide health care, housing, and education for everyone in this country.

In the richest country in the world, we have abundant resources. The problem is our public policies have funneled too much to too few.

We are building a Campaign among the poor to make sure this truth is heard all across this country and today we share it with you. The Poor People's Campaign is crying out all across the country that somebody has been hurting our people and it has gone on far too long and we won't be silent anymore.

⁷ Solomon, Hsiang et al., "Estimating Economic Damage from Climate Change in the United States," *Science* 356, no. 6345, (2017): 1362-1369, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aal4369>.