

Statement of
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before the
Budget Committee
United States House of Representatives

“Poverty in America: Economic Realities of Struggling Families”

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Chairman Yarmuth, Ranking Member Womack, and members of the committee, I am speaking here today on behalf of the thousands of people of every race, creed, color, gender and sexuality in 40 states and the District of Columbia who are part of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.

In this hearing room, you are seated as members of Congress on the left or the right, depending on party affiliation. Our campaign agenda is neither left nor right. It aims to reach toward a moral high ground. This agenda is rooted in the religious values of the prophet Isaiah, who says, “Woe unto you who legislate evil and rob the poor of their rights and make women and children their prey,” and Matthew 25, where Jesus makes clear that every nation will be judged by how it cares for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the immigrant and the least of these.

Our religious values call us to care for the marginalized first, and our Constitutional values unite us from many traditions, religious and secular, to establish justice and promote the general welfare.

We began three years ago with a moral revival tour and then, on the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign last year, we committed together to take up the unfinished business of reconstructing America. We have revived our forbearers' effort to root out the interlocking injustices of systemic racism (including racist voter suppression, re-segregation of schools, anti-immigrant policies and denial of our indigenous First Nation people's rights), systemic poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy and extreme militarism. We know we cannot get rid of any one of these evils without getting rid of the others.

The Audit is based on the testimonies of hundreds of people of every race, creed, color, religion, gender and sexual orientation. These are the people we have met who are struggling to survive amidst these interlocking injustices in America today.

In Michigan we met with mothers who can buy unleaded gas and unleaded paint but can't get unleaded water for their children.

In Harlan County, Kentucky, Black and White coal miners told us of their struggles with unemployment and crushing medical bills for diseases they got doing their job.

In Kansas, we met farmers who are struggling under the burden of rural poverty and lack of health care.

In Arizona, we connected with native Apaches who are facing the poisoning of their water and the desecration of their grave sites by corporate profiteers.

In my home state of North Carolina, we have suffered attacks on voting rights and racist gerrymandering that even our highest courts have described as "surgical racism."

All over the South we have found empirically that the same states that pass racialized voters suppression are also high-poverty, low-wage, and uninsured. And we have seen with our own eyes that white Americans make up the largest numbers of those who are suffering.

In Gray's Harbor, Washington, I spoke to homeless military veterans suffering both the effects of our endless wars and attacks by police and militia groups.

What we have seen conflicts with the economic headlines. The stock market and the GDP do not reflect people's lived experiences. Traditional poverty measures do not capture the vulnerability of those who easily fall below the poverty line whenever they face a financial emergency.

If you count all those who are poor or low-income, more than 140 million people, or 43.5% of our nation, are struggling to survive in the richest nation in the world.¹ The Federal Reserve similarly found that nearly 40 percent of all Americans would struggle to cover an unexpected \$400 expense.²

Poverty is a moral crisis in America, and we must see that it touches all of us. While the highest percentage concentration is among people of color, white people made up the largest number of poor and low-income people at more than 66 million.

These are just a few indicators of the persistence of the evils addressed by the 1968 Poor People's Campaign. We partnered with the Institute for Policy Studies to produce an extensive

¹ Based on the supplemental poverty measure calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau, which adjusts traditional poverty statistics to account for important factors such as some forms of federal assistance, geographic differences in cost of living, and out of pocket costs for food, housing, clothing, and utilities. Under this alternative measure, a family of four with two adults and two children who rented their home was in poverty if they made less than \$27,005 in 2017. Individuals and households living at 100-200% of the poverty threshold are technically categorized as low-income. About 140 million people, or 43% of the U.S. population, have annual income less than twice the SPM.

² U.S. Federal Reserve, "Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2018," May 2019. <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2018-report-economic-well-being-us-households-201905.pdf>

audit of these injustices entitled, “The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 years after the Poor People’s Campaign.”³.

The challenge you face, as lawmakers with power over our nation’s budget, is as critical as the one faced by your predecessors during Reconstruction. In some disturbing ways, a map of inequality in the United States today actually looks similar to the post-Civil War period.

The federal government has a responsibility to push our nation forward, together. We do not need more tax cuts for the rich. We do not need more missiles. We need to hear and see the voices and faces of poverty. We must end systemic policy violence against poor people and invest in the future of our people and planet.

This is a moral mandate for this moment in our nation. The work of Reconstruction is not done. We must do it together. Nothing less than the promise of democracy is at stake.

³ 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/>