

FOREWORD

A Call to End Child Poverty Now

America is going to hell if we don't use her vast resources to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life. — Martin Luther King Jr.

*They have become great and rich
they have grown fat and sleek. . . .
they judge not with justice
the cause of their fatherless . . .
and they do not defend the rights of the needy.* — Jeremiah 5:27–28

*Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood for the good or evil side;
Some great Cause, God's New Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
Parts the goats upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right,
And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light.* — James Russell Lowell

It is a national moral disgrace that there are 14.7 million poor children and 6.5 million extremely poor children in the United States of America — the world's largest economy. It is also unnecessary, costly and the greatest threat to our future national, economic and military security.

The 14.7 million poor children in our nation exceeds the populations of 12 U.S. states combined: Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming and is greater than the combined populations of the countries of Sweden and Costa Rica. Our nearly 6.5 million extremely poor children (living below half the poverty line) exceeds the combined populations of Delaware, Montana, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming and is greater than the populations of Denmark or Finland.

The younger children are the poorer they are during their years of greatest brain development. Every other American baby is non-White and 1 in 2 Black babies is poor, 150 years after slavery was legally abolished.

America's poor children did not ask to be born; did not choose their parents, country, state, neighborhood, race, color, or faith. In fact if they had been born in 33 other industrialized countries they would be less likely to be poor. Among these 35 countries, America ranks 34th in relative child poverty — ahead only of Romania whose economy is 99 percent smaller than ours.

The United Kingdom, which, if it were an American state, would rank just above Mississippi in per capita GDP according to the Washington Post, committed to and succeeded in cutting its child poverty rate by half in 10 years. It is about values and political will. Sadly, politics too often trumps good policy and moral decency and responsibility to the next generation and the nation's future. It is way past time for a critical mass of Americans to confront the hypocrisy of America's pretension to be a fair playing field while almost 15 million children languish in poverty.

This report calls for an end to child poverty in the richest nation on earth with a 60 percent reduction immediately. It shows solutions to ending child poverty in our nation already exist. For the first time this report shows how, by expanding investments in existing policies and programs that work, we can shrink overall child poverty 60 percent, Black child poverty 72 percent, and improve economic circumstances for 97 percent of poor children at a cost of \$77.2 billion a year. These policies could be pursued immediately, improving the lives and futures of millions of children and eventually saving taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars annually.

Child poverty is too expensive to continue. Every year the lost productivity and extra health and crime costs for adults who grew up poor add up to \$500 billion — six times more than the \$77 billion investment we propose to reduce child poverty by 60 percent. MIT Nobel Laureate economist and 2014 Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Dr. Robert Solow in his foreword to a 1994 CDF report *Wasting America's Future* presciently wrote: “For many years Americans have allowed child poverty levels to remain astonishingly high ... far higher than one would think a rich and ethical society would tolerate. The justification, when one is offered at all, has often been that action is expensive: ‘We have more will than wallet.’ I suspect that in fact our wallets exceed our will, but in any event this concern for the drain on our resources completely misses the other side of the equation: Inaction has its costs too ... As an economist I believe that good things are worth paying for; and that even if curing children’s poverty were expensive, it would be hard to think of a better use in the world for money. If society cares about children, it should be willing to spend money on them.”

Not only does child poverty cost far more than eliminating it would, we have so many better choices that reflect more just values as well as economic savings. We believe that food, shelter, quality early childhood investments to get every child ready for school and an equitable education for all children should take precedence over massive welfare for the rich and blatantly excessive spending for military weapons that do not work. We cannot let our leaders spend \$400 billion, without offsets, to make permanent tax breaks to wealthy corporations and others and then say we cannot afford to ensure every child is housed and fed.

Here are just a few ways we could fund the \$77 billion — 2 percent of our national budget — to make a huge down payment on ending preventable, costly and immoral child poverty in our wealthy nation:

- Closing tax loopholes that let U.S. corporations avoid \$90 billion in federal income taxes each year by shifting profits to subsidiaries in tax havens.
or
- Eliminating tax breaks for the wealthy by taxing capital gains and dividends at the same rates as wages, saving more than \$84 billion a year.
or
- Closing 23 tax loopholes in former House Ways and Means Chairman Dave Camp’s Tax Reform Act of 2014 which would free up an average of \$79.3 billion a year.
or
- Decreasing 14 percent of the nation’s FY2015 \$578 billion military budget. The U.S. has less than 5 percent of the world’s population but 37 percent of the world’s military expenditures.
or
- Scrapping the F-35 fighter jet program which is several years behind schedule and 68 percent over budget and still not producing fully functional planes. For the \$1.5 trillion projected costs of this program, the nation could reduce child poverty by 60 percent for 19 years.

If we love America and love our children we must all stand against the excessive greed that tramples millions of our children entrusted to our care. America’s Declaration of Independence says, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights.” After more than two centuries, it is time to make those truths evident in the lives of all poor children and to close our intolerable national hypocrisy gap and show the world whether democratic capitalism is an oxymoron or can work. A nation that does not stand for its children does not stand for anything and will not stand tall in the 21st century world or before God.



Marian Wright Edelman



A few months before declaring for the Presidency, Robert Kennedy pauses to talk with a migrant farm worker's child on the banks of a dry river in California's Central Valley. (Credit: © 1968 George Ballis/Take Stock)



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visiting poor families in Greenwood, Mississippi in July 1964. (Credit: © AP Photo/Jim Bourdier)