

Inequality and Poverty Were Destroying America Well Before Covid-19

This crisis shows us how an economy oriented around the whims of the rich leaves death and destruction in its wake.

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My mom contracted polio when she was 14. She survived and learned to walk again, but my life was deeply affected by that virus. Today, as our larger society attempts to self-distance and self-isolate, my family has texted about the polio quarantine my mom was put under: how my grandma fearfully checked my aunt's temperature every night because she shared a bedroom with my mom; how they had to put a sign on the front door of the house that read "quarantine" so that no one would visit.

Growing up with a polio survivor, I learned lessons about epidemics, sickness, disability, and inequality that have forever shaped my world. From a young age, I saw that all of us should be valued for our intrinsic worth as human beings; that there is no line between the supposedly deserving and the undeserving; that we should be loved for who we are, not what we do or how much money we have. My mom modeled for me what's possible when those most impacted by inequality and injustice dedicate their lives to protecting others from what hurts us all. She taught me that the dividing line between sickness and wellbeing loses its meaning in a society that doesn't care for everyone.

Here's the simple truth of 21st century America: All of us live in a time and in an economic system that values our lives relative to our ability to produce profits for the rich or in the context of the wealth we possess. Our wellness is measured by our efficiency and—a particular lesson in the age of the coronavirus—our sickness, when considered at all, is seen as an indication of individual limitations or moral failures, rather than as a symptom of a sick society.

About 31 million people today are uninsured in America, and 14 states have not even expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. The healthcare system is seemingly structured in defiance of the people it should serve, functioning as yet another way to maximize profits at the expense of millions. In this coronavirus moment, many more Americans are finally awakening to the bitter consequences, the damage, wrought when even a single person does not have access to the resources he or she needs to live decently or, for that matter, survive. With the spread of a pandemic, the cost to a nation that often treats collective care as, at best, an afterthought should become apparent. After all, more than 9,000 medical workers, many not adequately protected from the disease, have already contracted it.

For decades, both political parties have pushed the narrative that illness, homelessness, poverty, and inequality are minor aberrations in an otherwise healthy society. Even now, as the possibility of a potentially historic depression looms, assurances that the mechanics of our economy are fundamentally strong (and Covid-19 an unexpected fluke) remain commonplace. And yet, while that economy's productivity has indeed increased strikingly since the 1970s, the

gains from it have gone to an increasingly small number of people (and corporations), while real wages have stagnated for the majority of workers. Don't be fooled. This crisis didn't start with the coronavirus: Our collapsing oil and gas industry, for instance, points to an energy system that was already on the brink, and a majority of economists agree that a manufacturing decline had actually begun in August 2019.

The Cost of Inequality

It should no longer be possible to ignore the structural crisis of poverty and inequality that has been eating away at American society over these last decades. Historic unemployment numbers in recent weeks only reveal how expendable the majority of workers are in a crunch. This is happening at a moment when it's ever clearer how many of the most "essential" tasks in our economy are done by the least well-paid workers. The ranks of the poor are widening at a startling clip, as many more of us are now experiencing what dire insecurity feels like in an economy built on non-unionized, low-wage work and part-time jobs.

In order to respond to such a crisis and the growing needs of millions, it's important to first acknowledge the deeper history of injustice and pain that brought us all here. In the last years of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr., put it well when he said that "the prescription for the cure rests with an accurate diagnosis of the disease." To develop a cure not just for this virus but for a nation with the deepest kind of inequality at its core, what's first needed (as with any disease) is an accurate diagnosis.

Today, more than 38 million people officially live below the federal poverty line and, in truth, that figure should have shocked the nation into action before the coronavirus even arrived here. No such luck and here's the real story anyway: The official measure of poverty, developed in 1964, doesn't even take into account household expenses like health care, child care, housing, and transportation, not to speak of other costs that have burgeoned in recent decades. The world has undergone profound economic transformations over the last 66 years and yet this out-of-date measure, based on three times a family's food budget, continues to shape policymaking at every level of government as well as the contours of the American political and moral imagination.

Two years ago, the Poor People's Campaign (which I co-chair alongside Reverend William Barber II) and the Institute for Policy Studies released an audit of America. Its centerpiece was a far more realistic assessment of poverty and economic precariousness in this country. Using the Census Bureau's Supplemental Poverty Measure as a baseline, which, among other things, measures family income after taxes and out-of-pocket expenses for food, clothing, housing, and utilities, there are at least 140 million people who are poor—or just a \$400 emergency from that state. (Of that, there are now untold examples in this pandemic moment.)

As poverty has grown and spread, one of the great political weapons of politicians and the ruling elite over the past decades (only emphasized in the age of Trump) has been to minimize, dismiss, and racialize it. In the 1970s, President Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy" coded it into Republican national politics; in the 1980s, in the years of Ronald Reagan's presidency, the fabricated image of "the welfare queen" gained symbolic prominence. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton's welfare "reforms" enshrined such thinking in the arguments of both parties. Today, given the outright racism and xenophobia that has become the hallmark of Donald Trump's presidency, "poor" has become a curse word.

It is, of course, true that, among the 140 million poor people in the U.S., a disproportionate number are indeed people of color. The inheritance of slavery, Jim Crow, never-ending discrimination, and the mass incarceration of black men in particular, as well as a generational

disinvestment in such populations, could have resulted in nothing less. And yet the reality of poverty stretches deep into every community in this country. According to that audit of America, the poor or low-income today consist of 24 million blacks, 38 million Latinos, eight million Asian-Americans, two million Native peoples, and 66 million whites.

Those staggering numbers, already a deadweight for the nation, are likely to prove a grotesque underestimate in the coronaviral world we now inhabit and yet none of this should be a surprise. Although we couldn't have predicted the exact circumstances of this pandemic, social theorists remind us that conditions were ripe for just this kind of economic dislocation.

Over the past 50 years, for instance, rents have risen faster than income in every city. Before the coronavirus outbreak, there was not a single county in this country where a person making a minimum wage with a family could afford a two-bedroom apartment. No surprise then that, throughout this crisis, there has been a rise in rent strikes, housing takeovers, and calls for moratoriums on evictions. The quiet fact is that, in the last few decades, unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and homelessness have become ever more deeply and permanently structured into this society.

Covid-19 and the Descent into Poverty

Over the years, one political narrative has been trumpeted by both parties: that we don't have enough to provide for every American. This scarcity argument has undergirded every federal budget in recent history and yet it falls flat when we look at the 53 percent of every federal discretionary dollar that goes to the Pentagon, the trillions of dollars that have been squandered in this country's never-ending war on terror, not to speak of the unprecedented financial gains the wealthiest have made (even in the midst of the current crisis). Of course, this economic order becomes a genuine moral scandal the moment attention is focused on the three billionaires who possess more wealth than the bottom half of society.

Since the government began transferring wealth from the poor to the very rich under the guise of "trickle-down" (but actually gusher-up) economics, key public institutions, labor unions, and the electoral process have been under attack. The healthcare system has been further privatized, public housing has been demolished, public water and sanitation systems have been held hostage by emergency managers, and the social safety net has been eviscerated.

In these same years, core government functions have been turned over to the private sector and the free market. The result: Levels of poverty and inequality in this country now outmatch those seen in the Gilded Age. All of this, in turn, laid the groundwork for the rapid spread of death and disease via the Covid-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on poor people and people of color.

When the coronavirus first became a national emergency, the Fed materialized \$1.5 trillion dollars in loans to Wall Street, a form of corporate welfare that may never be paid back. In the following weeks, the Fed and a congressional bipartisan stimulus package funneled trillions more in bailouts to the largest corporations. Meanwhile, tens of millions of Americans were left out of that CARES Act: Forty-eight percent of the workforce did not receive paid sick leave; 27 million uninsured people and 10 percent of the insured who couldn't even afford a doctor's visit have no guarantee of free or reasonably priced medical treatment; 11 million undocumented immigrants and their 5 million children will receive no emergency provisions; 2.3 million of the incarcerated have been left in the petri dish of prison; 3 million Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients saw no increase in their benefits; and homeless assistance funds were targeted at only about 500,000 people, although 8–11 million are homeless or housing insecure. Such omissions

are guaranteed to prove debilitating, even potentially lethal, for many. They also represent cracks in a dam ready to break in a nation without a guaranteed living wage or universal healthcare as debt mounts, wages stagnate, and the pressures of ecological devastation and climate change intensify.

Recently, news reports have made it far clearer just where (and whom) Covid-19 is hitting hardest. In New York City, now the global epicenter of the pandemic, for instance, the areas with the highest rates of positive tests overlap almost exactly with neighborhoods where the most “essential workers” live—and you undoubtedly won’t be surprised to learn that most of them are poor or low-income ones, 79 percent of them black or Latino. The five ZIP Codes with the most coronavirus cases have an average income of under \$27,000; while in the five ZIP Codes with the least, the average income is \$118,000.

Across the Black Belt of the Southern states, the poor and black are dying from the coronavirus at an alarming rate. In many of those states, wages are tied to industries that rely on now interrupted regular household spending. They also have among the fewest resources and the most vehement anti-union and wage-suppression laws. That, in turn, leaves so many Americans all that more vulnerable to the Covid-19 crisis, the end of which is nowhere in sight. Chalk this up, among other things, to decades of divestment in public institutions and the entrenchment of extremist agendas in state legislatures. The Black Belt accounts for nine of the 14 states that have not expanded Medicaid and for 60 percent of all rural hospital closures.

Nor are these the only places now feeling the consequences of hospitals being bought up or closed for private profit. In Philadelphia, for instance, Hahnemann Hospital, which had served that city’s poorest patients for more than 170 years, was recently bought and closed by a real estate speculator who then attempted to extract a million dollars a month from the local government to reopen it. Now, as the coronavirus ravages Philadelphia, Hahnemann’s beds sit empty, reminiscent of the notorious shuttering of New Orleans’s Charity Hospital in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In fact, lessons from the catastrophe of Katrina resonate heavily today, as the poor suffer and die while the rich and their political allies begin to circle the ruins, seeing opportunities to further enhance their power. After Katrina, many poor and black residents of New Orleans who had to evacuate were unable to return, while the city became a laboratory for a new onslaught of neoliberal reforms from health care to housing. One state legislator was overheard telling lobbyists, “We finally cleaned out public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.” It hardly takes a stretch of the imagination to envision similar braggadocio in the post-coronavirus era.

Inescapably Bound Together

The dual crises of pandemic and inequality are revealing ever more clearly how the descent into poverty is helping to destroy American society from the inside out. In a remarkably brief span of time, these crises have also highlighted our collective interdependence.

One of my earliest memories is of helping my mom walk when I was younger than my youngest child is now. As we slid down the wintry streets of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my small hand in hers, she suddenly fell and I went down alongside her. I had been unable to keep us from crashing to the ground.

And yet, even when I couldn’t do what needed to be done alone, I recognized, with the clarity that perhaps only a child can have, how much we as a family (and, by extension, as a people) were inescapably bound together—that when one of us falls, so many of us fall. And that’s why,

whatever Donald Trump or Jared Kushner or the rest of that crew in Washington and across the country may think, we can no longer tolerate leaving anybody out.

Hasn't the time finally come to reject the false narrative of scarcity? Isn't it time to demand a transformative moral agenda that reaches from the bottom up?

If the wealthy were to pay a relatively modest amount more in taxes and we shrank our war economy to support the common good, then universal health care, living wages, and a guaranteed income, decent and affordable housing, strong programs for the poor, and even more might finally be within reach. This crisis is offering us a striking demonstration of how an economy oriented around the whims of the rich brings death and destruction in its wake.

A society organized around the needs of the poor, on the other hand, would improve life for all of us—and especially in this Covid-19 moment, exactly this might be possible.

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