

Finding the Will and the Way: Ending Poverty in America

Nearly 40 million people are living in poverty in the U.S., over 10 percent of our population, and with governments at all levels struggling to balance budgets, it may seem impossible to fully address the growing need given available resources.

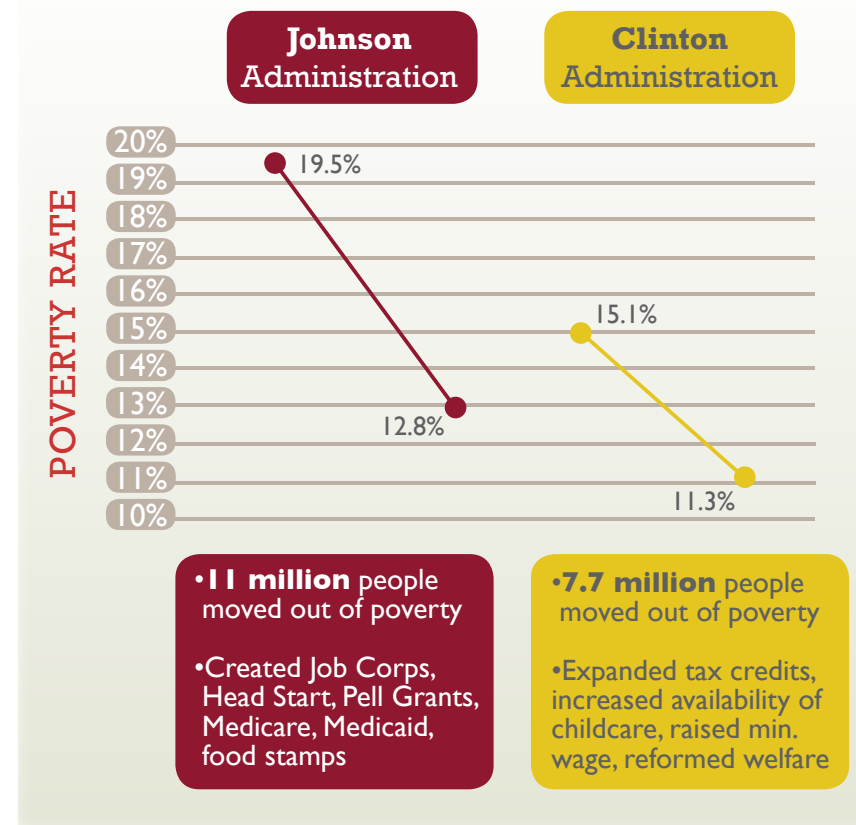
Ending Poverty Is Possible

By way of example, three young men from the impoverished neighborhoods of Newark, New Jersey—Sampson Davis, Rameck Hunt, and George Jenkins—mutually supported one another through high school, and given where they were raised, the statistical improbable heights of completing college and medical school. During their junior year, a university recruiter visited their school to talk about a program that groomed underprivileged students for medical careers. After the seminar, Davis, Rameck and George made a pact to stick together, go to college, graduate and become doctors. Sampson, Rameck and George not only escaped poverty and but all three went on to become doctors. They have since founded the Three Doctors Foundation,

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The Three Doctors, from left: Sampson Davis, Rameck Hunt, and George Jenkins, escaped poverty and formed the Three Doctors Foundation.



19%) still faced employment barriers coupled with a lack of access to federal welfare programs, leaving them in poverty and possibly worse off. Ultimately, the national poverty rate dropped from 15.1 to 11.3 percent between 1993 and 2000, which equated to 7.7 million people being lifted out of poverty.

- **LBJ's Great Society and the War on Poverty.** Within his very first State of the Union address, President Lyndon Baines Johnson declared a war on poverty. The subsequent joint efforts of Congress and LBJ were comprehensive and multifaceted, encompassing employment, education, housing, basic needs assistance and national service. Multiple programs were created that still exist today, including Job Corps, Head Start, Pell Grants and federal student loans, Medicare,

which aims "to inspire and motivate youth through education, to achieve leadership and career success in their community through the formation of positive peer and mentor relationships."

Medicaid, food stamps and Volunteers In Service to America. During the Johnson Administration, the poverty rate dropped from 19.5 to 12.8 percent, moving 11 million out of poverty. As the programs continued to flourish after Johnson left office, the poverty rate dropped even lower.

The Center for American Progress is a part of a larger movement of advocates, faith-based organizations, policymakers, academics, think tanks and others who believe that it is possible to drastically reduce, and eventually end, poverty in America. These groups believe that no problem is too big once the collective will of our nation is behind solving it. That attitude is also based on past successes with drastically reducing poverty here in America and internationally, for example:

- **U.K. Child Poverty Target.** In 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a goal to end child poverty within a generation. The country decided to tackle the problem via policies that increased benefits and tax credits for families with children, established a minimum wage, expanded childcare and employment services. Statistics show that child poverty was cut in half within eight years—1.7 million fewer children were living in poverty.

- **Clinton-era Reductions in Poverty.** During the 1990s the economy was strong and President Clinton and the Congress created various government policies that promoted and supported work. For example, they expanded tax credits for low-income workers, increased the availability of childcare and raised the minimum wage. Significantly, the Clinton years were also defined by large scale welfare reform which produced some mixed results—many women successfully moved from welfare to work while a significant number (15-

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A Game Plan

Any new movement must be based on an awareness of poverty in America. In 2008, over 38.9 million people lived below the poverty line, representing 13.2 percent of the population. In 2009, in the U.S., the poverty threshold for a single person under 65 was \$10,830; the threshold for a family group of four, including two children, was \$22,050.

Alleviating and eventually ending poverty requires a thoughtful, comprehensive and multi-faceted strategy. A taskforce of well-respected poverty experts from the worlds of academia and advocacy developed an encompassing plan: From Poverty to Prosperity: A National Strategy to Cut Poverty In Half. The plan includes a series of recommendations, such as:

1) Work Opportunities and Supports.

Work is definitely a key antidote to poverty. However, individuals with limited skills and opportunities may find it difficult to obtain and maintain employment. This is particularly true of the estimated 1.4 to 5 million disconnected youth in their late teens and early twenties who are neither involved in school or work. Thus, the taskforce recommended greater investments in job training, job placement, and service programs that help provide such supports, including YouthBuild, AmeriCorps, Service and Conservation Corps, and Youth Opportunity Grants.

Additionally, approximately 41 percent of the 2.3 million people incarcerated in the nation's prisons and jails have not completed high school. Once released from prison, they frequently face job discrimination due to their criminal backgrounds. The jobless rate of this

group exceeds 75 percent one year after release. Solutions focused on job training as well as preventing crime and incarceration must be developed at all levels of government.

Finally, childcare improvements and expansions are needed. Parents cannot work at all, or work effectively, if they don't have a safe and nurturing place to leave their children during those hours when they are on the job. However, for many low-wage workers childcare costs are impossibly unaffordable. Forty percent of poor, single, working mothers who paid for childcare in 2001 spent at least half of their cash income on childcare. Federal and state governments offer childcare assistance to low-income workers, but current structures and resources are insufficient to truly address the need. It is estimated that only 14 percent of federally eligible children received assistance in 2000. Thus, some restructuring of the system and increased investments are in order.

2) Improving Incomes.

Unfortunately, there are many people in this country who work but are still struggling to get by. In 2008, 8.9 million people were considered a part of the working poor, meaning that they worked for a significant portion of the year, but still fell under the federal poverty line. Thus, the Center for American Progress' Poverty Taskforce recommends that the federal minimum wage be re-established at 50 percent of the average wage (allowing it to automatically increase over time). Fourteen states and the District of Columbia have enacted minimum wage laws that exceed federal requirements and more states should consider following suit. Income improvements could be further achieved through expanded tax credits for working families and a greater freedom to unionize and collectively bargain for improved wages and benefits.

3) Education.

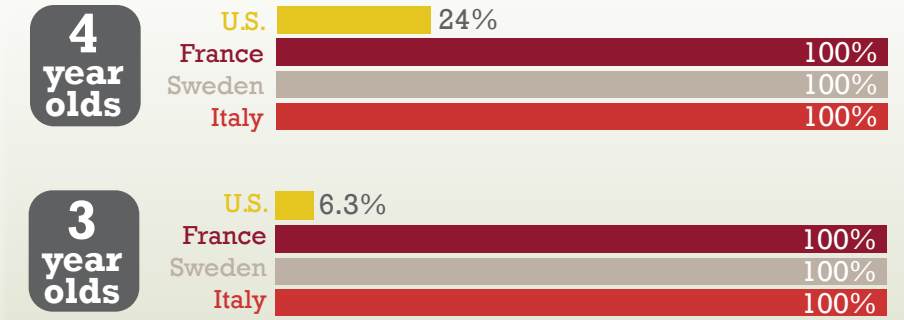
Education truly opens doors to new opportunities and forms a solid pathway into the middle class. However, in order to be successful, it must work at every level. Thus, children require access to quality early childhood education. In the U.S., only 24 percent of 4-year-olds and 6.3 percent of 3-year-olds participate in pre-school services, reflecting the need to expand preschool programs such as Head Start, while in Sweden, France and Italy 100 percent of 3- to 4-year-olds are enrolled in school.

President Obama agrees that continued effort should be placed into improving K-12 education through measures designed to expand learning time, promote high expectations and accountability and improve teacher quality. The Obama Administration's Early Learning Challenge Grant proposal challenges states to develop effective, in-



Participation in preschool and early childhood education programs, such as Head Start, is vital to a child's education and future chances for success.

Participation in Pre-School Activities



YouthBuild is a youth and community development program that addresses core issues facing low-income communities: housing, education, employment, crime prevention, and leadership development. In these programs, low-income young people ages 16-24 work toward their GEDs or high school diplomas, learn job skills and serve their communities by building affordable housing, and transform their own lives and roles in society.

