

MCC WASHINGTON OFFICE GUIDE TO Poverty in the United States



Mennonite
Central
Committee

There's just too much month at the end of the food for these folks," says Brenda Gross, director of Eolia Christian Community Outreach (ECCO), an MCC partner in Kentucky. When the food runs out, low-income seniors and families come to ECCO for boxes packed with meat, cheese, frozen fruit and canned vegetables supplied by the government's Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). Many of ECCO's clients are parents with minimum wage jobs.

Appalachia, rich in natural and cultural resources, has suffered centuries of exploitation from coal and timber companies that pollute the water, ruin the land and devastate communities. "Virtually none of the economic benefit 'trickles down' to the local economy," says Jim Huebner, MCC Appalachia program co-coordinator. "Until underlying structural conditions change, the need for such programs [as the CSFP] will continue." Yet Kentucky may be among the ten states hardest hit by the 2006 federal budget's deep cuts to the CSFP.

Who's Poor?

The story repeats itself in rural towns and inner cities across the United States: food bank lines are growing as government aid is shrinking. In 2003, one in eight U.S. Americans, 36 million, lived under the poverty line (\$19,350 for a family of four), up 1.3 million from 2002. In the same year, the number of people without health insurance rose to 45 million. And in 2004, the hourly wage a full-time worker must earn to afford fair market rent for a two-bedroom home was \$15.37 almost triple the minimum wage.¹

In 2004, 74 percent of food pantries and 65 percent of homeless shelters reported increased visits. Meanwhile, 35 percent lost federal funding.² In the same year, all 50 states reduced health coverage for the poor;³ and in the past three years, about three-fifths of states lowered eligibility for child care assistance.⁴ This spring, Congress passed a budget that slashes money for poverty programs, increases defense spending and cuts taxes for the wealthy, while actually increasing the deficit over the long term.

The world's wealthiest nation, the United States ranks 28th of 30 industrialized countries in disparity between the rich and poor. In 2000, the population's top one percent claimed a larger share of after-tax income than the bottom 40 percent.⁵ And poverty discriminates. In 2002, the median net

worth of African-American households was \$5,988. Latino households: \$7,932. White households: \$88,651.⁶

Who's Responsible?

Liberals and conservatives disagree about poverty's causes. Structural injustice? Personal decisions? Both, argues theologian Ronald Sider, along with sudden catastrophes and permanent disabilities. The roots of poverty are tangled. For example, in 2003, children under six in single-mother families were more than five times as likely to be poor than those in married-couple families.⁷ Yet, in 2000, only 1.2 percent of children whose single mothers had a college degree and full-time employment were poor.⁸

One thing is clear. In a country where deep poverty and extravagant wealth co-exist, everyone is responsible. Government programs such as housing, health care, education, public transportation, child care assistance, tax credits and environmental protections are vital in reversing structural injustice. Community-based, non-profit and church programs that offer social services, restore prisoners, assist addicts, foster stable families, build peaceful neighborhoods and work against racism are equally necessary for nurturing spiritual renewal and calling the government to task.

Sider urges Christians of all stripes to embrace "the good news *and* good works" and unite to overcome poverty. "The Bible is clear," he writes in *Just Generosity*, "God judges societies by what they do to people at the bottom." ■

Notes

1. National Low Income Housing Coalition
2. National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness
3. Families USA
4. Center for Law and Social Policy
5. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
6. Pew Hispanic Center
7. U.S. Census Bureau
8. Children's Defense Fund

GUNS OR BUTTER?

How could we have spent the 2004 \$453.7 billion military budget to alleviate child poverty?

- One week (\$8.7 billion) equals one year of child care for 1.4 million children.
- One day (\$1.2 billion) equals one year of health coverage for 845,000 children.
- One hour (\$51.6 million) equals one year of pre-school for 7,400 children.
- One minute (\$860,815) equals immunization for 1,300 children.

—from *Children's Defense Fund*

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) U.S. Washington Office is a Mennonite and Brethren in Christ presence on Capitol Hill which provides and encourages prophetic witness to the way of Christ on matters of public policy. For additional resources, contact the MCC Washington Office at the address on the back page. Compiled by Bethany Spicher, May 2005.

Faith that reflects

At Bethel New Life, a faith-based community development organization on Chicago's West Side, a former welfare recipient can receive training to run a day care center, get help in fixing up her house and look forward to earning \$17,000–\$24,000 per year for her work. Funded in part by the U.S. Department of Labor, the project is only one of Bethel New Life's many employment, housing, community organizing and policy advocacy efforts, all held together by the lively worship at Bethel Lutheran Church.

Bethel New Life is "a city on a hill," a model of God's upside-down kingdom. Yet, recognizing the impossibility of reversing structural injustice alone, the organization calls on the government to do its part. The church has historically led the way in caring for the vulnerable: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming strangers, visiting prisoners, as Jesus instructed (Matthew 25:35). It's tempting, then, for policymakers to think that the church can pick up the government's safety net slack, and to trade increased faith-based funding for decreased social spending. But for the poor, it's no bargain.

Rebecca Blank calculates in *It Takes a Nation* that every U.S. church, synagogue and mosque would need to contribute \$300,000 per year to cover costs for just three government programs: public assistance, disability payments and food stamps. Add Medicaid and the sum more than doubles. Given that evangelical Christians tithed just 2.5 percent of their incomes in 2000, the

prospects for such generosity are slim. But what does the Bible say about the role of church and state in caring for the poor?

God's own economy provides a place to start. The Jubilee structures—a gleaning operation, a micro-credit lending institution and a land redistribution program—allowed for private property and wealth accumulation, but not at the expense of others. In addition, Jubilee mandated a fresh start for everyone every 50 years (Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 15). Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18). The early church followed his lead, selling their possessions and sharing the proceeds with anyone in need (Acts 4:34–35).

The principle seems to be that justice is restorative and redistributive. Resources are to be shared based on need, rather than wealth, status or achievement, with the goal of restoring everyone to productive capacity in the community. Of course the church, the body of Christ, is called to live out this vision. But the reign of God extends to the government as well. In fact, God commanded those in power to provide order and justice in society (Romans 13:1–7, Psalm 72:1–2, 4).

As David Hilfiker writes in his 2000 article for *The Other Side*, "The Limits of Charity," poverty is built into our society in the form of low wages, rampant unemployment and rising costs for housing and health care. Because it can not meet all the needs, the church's work includes advocacy to government to call for structures that provide for the common good, rather than institutionalize injustice. "Only the government," Hilfiker writes, "that is, 'we the people,' acting in concert locally, state-wide or nationally can create or oversee programs that assure everyone adequate access to what they need." ■

SCRIPTURAL SAFETY NETS

- **Third year tithe and other provisions for poor widows, orphans and sojourners (Deuteronomy 14:28–29, 26:12; Acts 6:1).**
- **Corners of grain fields, dropped sheaves and grapes left for the poor (Leviticus 19:9–10, Deuteronomy 24:19–21).**
- **Every seventh year, the fields left fallow and the poor allowed to reap their natural growth (Exodus 23:10–11, Leviticus 25:1–7).**
- **A zero-interest loan for the poor, forgiven in the sabbatical year (Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:35–38, Deuteronomy 15:1–11, Matthew 6:12).**
- **In the seventh year, Israelites who became slaves to repay debts made free and liberally provided for (Exodus 21:1–11, Leviticus 25:47–53, Deuteronomy 15:12–18).**
- **Proceeds of sold property and goods redistributed to anyone in need (Acts 2:43–47, 4:32–37).**

—from *Just Generosity* by Ronald Sider, 1999

Faith that acts

How can we build communities in which resources are shared based on need, rather than wealth, status or achievement? Following are some policy and action suggestions to start the discussion:

Speaking Truth to Power: Alternative Policies

- *Raise the minimum wage.* At the federal minimum wage (\$5.15 per hour), a full-time worker earns \$10,712 per year, more than \$8,000 below the poverty line.
- *Expand tax credits for working families.* In 2002, 21 million families and individuals benefited from the Earned Income Tax Credit, which lifts more children out of poverty than any other government program.¹
- *Improve access to health care for all.* Medicaid covers more than 50 million children, parents, seniors and people with disabilities, maintaining administrative costs lower than private insurance.²
- *Increase access to affordable housing.* There are 42 affordable rental units available for every 100 families who need them.³
- *Make poverty reduction the goal of welfare.* The goal of public assistance programs like Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) should be decreasing poverty, not welfare rolls; and they should include funding for child care, job training and public transportation, along with sensible work requirements.
- *Restore benefits to immigrants.* Welfare “reform” in 1996 forced immigrants who enter the United States legally to wait five years for benefits.
- *Expand child care benefits for parents.* Child care can cost between \$4,000 and \$10,000 per child annually. Former welfare recipients with young children are 82 percent more likely to be employed after two years if they receive child care assistance.⁴
- *Support the food stamp program.* Food stamps currently supply one dollar per meal, on average, for 25.5 million people at 130% of the poverty line.⁵
- *Redirect child support payments.* Fathers are more likely to pay child support when the money goes directly to their families, rather than to the state, as it does when mothers are welfare recipients.
- *Provide sex education, relationship counseling and parenting classes:* Federally-funded programs to prevent teenage pregnancy, strengthen families or promote marriage must include safeguards against unwanted marriage and domestic violence.

A City on a Hill: Action Suggestions

- *Build a relationship with a welfare recipient* or someone who lives under the poverty line.
- *Pay attention to the local news.* Be aware of policies and programs in your area affecting low-income people.
- *Learn the facts* about domestic poverty. A recent survey revealed that the average U.S. American believes there are 2 million people in poverty in this country.
- *Donate time, talents, money* or other resources to local organizations working to restore people in poverty: health clinics, affordable housing groups, child care and job training centers, food and clothing banks, drug rehabilitation and prisoner re-entry programs, etc.
- *Join local, state or national groups* that address underlying causes that keep people in poverty.
- *Write, call or visit your elected officials,* urging them to support permanent solutions to poverty in your community and nation; or write a letter to the editor of your local paper. Organize a letter-writing campaign to magnify your efforts.
- *Live simply so that others may simply live.* Journey through *Trek: Venture into a World of Enough*, a study guide available from Herald Press. ■

Notes

1. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
2. Kaiser Family Foundation
3. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
4. Center for Law and Social Policy
5. U.S. Department of Agriculture

Pontius' Puddle



Resources on Poverty in the United States

Organizations

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

110 Maryland Avenue NE, Suite 502
Washington, DC 20002
Phone: (202) 544-6564
E-mail: mccwash@mcc.org; Web: www.mcc.org/us/washington

Monitors U.S. public policy for its impact on MCC's domestic and international relief, development and peacebuilding work.

Call to Renewal

2401 15th Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
Phone: (202) 328-8745
E-mail: ctr@calltorenewal.org; Web: www.calltorenewal.org

Coordinates faith groups in advocacy against domestic poverty, offers resources for congregations and leads a living wage campaign.

Bread for the World

50 F Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20001
Phone: (202) 639-9400 / (800) 82-BREAD
E-mail: bread@bread.org; Web: www.bread.org

Networks tens of thousands of Christians by congressional district to advocate for national and global anti-poverty policy, including an annual Offering of Letters.

Children's Defense Fund

25 E Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
Phone: (202) 628-8787
Web: www.childrensdefense.org

Advocates for public policy that protects children—especially children of color, low-income children and those with disabilities. Produces an annual report, "The State of America's Children."

Families USA

1201 New York Avenue, Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (202) 628-3030
E-mail: info@familiesusa.org; Web: www.familiesusa.org

Works for high-quality, affordable health care for all at the national, state and community level; offers educational resources and advocacy tools through a Health Action Network.

National Low Income Housing Coalition

727 15th Street NW, 6th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005
Phone: (202) 662-1530
E-mail: info@nlihc.org; Web: www.nlihc.org

Educates and advocates about the affordable housing crisis in the United States.

Interfaith Worker Justice

1020 West Bryn Mawr Avenue, 4th Floor
Chicago, IL 60660
Phone: (773) 728-8400
Web: www.nicwj.org

Organizes the U.S. religious community in campaigns to improve wages, benefits and working conditions for low-wage workers.

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

820 1st Street NE, Suite 510
Washington, DC 20002
Phone: (202) 408-1080
E-mail: center@cbpp.org; Web: www.cbpp.org

Conducts research and analysis to inform public debates over budget and tax policies and to help ensure that the needs of low-income people are considered in these debates.

Web Sites

National Priorities Project

<http://www.nationalpriorities.org>

All kinds of facts and figures. Calculate human-needs trade-offs for the military budget, the cost of war in Iraq or the price of nuclear weapons in your nation, state or city.

Poverty USA

<http://www.usccb.org/cchd/povertyusa/index.htm>

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development's "Tour Poverty USA" shows how those under the poverty line struggle to meet their needs; the Education Center offers resources for children and adults.

Food Security Learning Center

<http://www.worldhungeryear.org/fslc>

World Hunger Year pulls together information on community food security, nutrition, domestic hunger and poverty, federal food programs, rural poverty, the family farm crisis and migrant workers.

Books

Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting By in America by Barbara Ehrenreich, Henry Holt (2001).

Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America by Ron Sider, Baker Books (1999).

Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation by Jonathan Kozol, HarperCollins (1995).

Videos

A Voice on the Hill: How Advocacy to Government Grows Out of Service, Mennonite Central Committee. Tells how MCC works with and advocates for people in poverty in the United States, with interviews from Philadelphia and Appalachia.

Hunger No More: Faces Behind the Facts, Mennonite Media. Looks at the persistent problem of U.S. and global hunger in the 21st century and offers solutions.