

Preface

When Hurricane Katrina blew through the Gulf Coast states in late August of 2005, it exposed to the nation and world that the United States of America has a secret that for the most part has been kept hidden from mainstream society. The secret is this: although the United States is the wealthiest country in the world, it is also the leader in poverty when compared with other industrialized nations. Today, 37 million people, or almost 13 percent of the U.S. population, live in poverty.

Yet, poverty has not just plagued this generation, but rather has been a defining issue in the United States, from its founding right up to today. Unquestionably, the United States has paid, and continues to pay, a price for its high rates of poverty, as it damages the individual citizen and the larger society. Social science research demonstrates that poor people have higher rates of infant mortality, childhood lead poisoning, crime, and divorce as well as lower test scores in school and life expectancy.

Poverty is a description of want of the basic needs of life, as well as a set of relationships operating in a social structure. Thus, poor people have difficulty providing themselves with food, shelter, health care, and education. The poor also are at the bottom of the American social hierarchy, so they have difficulty in obtaining power and status.

I wrote this book out of a desire to end this want as well as to alter the set of social relationships currently operating in the United States. In my academic training, I was amazed by the contradiction that the United States was the richest country in the world but also the leader in the industrialized world in poverty rates. My interest in poverty solutions intensified after studying the civil rights movement, which had defeated the legal foundations of segregation and racial discrimination, but left many leaders in the movement feeling as if the changes were only at the surface level since poverty was still pervasive in communities of color. The final motivation was the reaction of my students to the high poverty rate in the United States. By mid-semester of my courses, students understood

that poverty was a major problem, but they were frustrated that social science seemed to focus on the problem rather than the solution. I wanted to respond to this frustration, and perhaps in some small way move the field of social science closer to a solution-based approach.

The idea of this book is to follow one theme—the social solution to poverty—from Thomas Paine’s “agrarian justice” to Josiah Quincy’s proposal for the construction of poorhouses; from the Freedmen’s Bureau to Sitting Bull’s demand for money and supplies; from Coxey’s army of the unemployed to Jane Addams’s Hull House; from the Civil Works Administration to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s call for an Economic Bill of Rights; and from William Julius Wilson’s universal program of reform to George Bush’s “armies of compassion.” Although the book follows one theme, I recognize that the poor are not a homogeneous group. Some of the categories of the poor include:

- children (35 percent of all Americans in poverty, or 13 million, are kids, making the United States first in child poverty in the industrialized world)
- seniors (10 percent, or 4 million seniors, live in poverty)
- working poor (66 percent of all poor people work for some portion of the year)
- whites (9 percent, or 16.9 million whites, live in poverty)
- blacks and Latinos (9 million for each group, but with poverty rates more than twice that of whites)
- female-headed households (4 million, or 28 percent of all households with no husband present, live in poverty)
- people living in suburban and rural settings (9 percent of the poor live in the suburbs, 14 percent in rural areas, and 14 percent in urban inner-city cores)
- the severely poor (12.2 million, or 39 percent of the poor, are at or below one-half the poverty line)

This book attempts to address this level of diversity and complexity by focusing on poverty solutions that speak to such issues as social security, welfare, wages, labor conditions, education, hunger, racism, health care, deindustrialization, the feminization of poverty, suburbanization, homelessness, and wealth inequality.

The book is organized into chapters, with each chapter containing three parts. The first section introduces a discussion of the social context and a general overview of the solutions from a certain era in U.S. history. The goal of this first section is to provide a general understanding of the context in which the vari-

ous solutions arose. The second section contains five to ten original documents (speeches, articles, and proposals) that highlight various grassroots and elite plans. Note that some proposals are mentioned in the social context section, but not included in the document section, since it was impossible to include all of them due to page constraints. The third section raises discussion of the outcomes of each proposal. Here is where the reader will learn what happened with the various plans.

Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the documents and data in this book. Possible errors brought to the attention of the publisher and author will be researched, and if verified, will be corrected in future editions.

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