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50 Years After the War on Poverty: Successes Should Inspire the Next Bold Steps for Poor Children

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The safety net programs that emerged from the War on Poverty and later antipoverty efforts—Head Start and Early Head Start, Medicaid, nutrition assistance (formerly the Food Stamp Program and now the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the Child Tax Credit (CTC), and child care assistance—have scored important successes. They have improved the lives of poor and near-poor families and strengthened longer-term outcomes for poor children, leading to better health and greater economic success for them many years later, into adulthood.¹⁻⁴

These programs have also sharply reduced poverty, according to careful estimates by researchers—special estimates that are necessary because the widely reported poverty rate doesn't account for many of the most important antipoverty programs. For example, researchers at Columbia University have estimated that public programs today have cut the percentage of Americans who are poor almost in half, from 29% to 16%, compared with a minimal reduction of just 1 percentage point back in 1967 (from 27% to 26%).⁵ And based on the Census Bureau's 2015 estimate, the EITC and other refundable tax credits raised 9.2 million people out of poverty and SNAP raised 4.6 million.⁶

The positive effects of large, ambitious public policies aren't limited to decades-old history. Census Bureau reports find that the Affordable Care Act (ACA) reduced the number of individuals lacking health insurance by about 4 million from 2014 to 2015, which comes on the heels of 8.8 million people who gained health insurance in 2014.^{6,7} Many of those helped were young adults and low-income workers. Unfortunately, despite the strong positive effect of these public programs, the poverty rate remains far too high in the United States today, particularly among America's next generation of children and young adults.

In 2015, one-fifth of U.S. children, 21% of the youngest children (younger than 5 years of age), and almost one-fifth of young adults ages 18 to 24 lived in households with incomes below the federal poverty level (\$20,090 for a family of three in 2015). Children of color suffer the most, with about one-third of black children and 3 in 10 Hispanic children living in poverty. Adding in near-poor households with incomes below twice the poverty level brings the total to 4 in 10 children and young adults who are living in financially precarious households.⁶ Struggling with economic

insecurity is now a typical, not a rare, experience for America's next generation.

The problem is that public safety net and work support programs have run into a strong head wind from the economy. Over the decades, changes in the labor market—shrinking wages for many workers, part-time and volatile schedules, lack of affordable child care, and too few opportunities to move up to a better job with higher wages—have left families unable to make ends meet, even with modest help from public programs.

Thus, 70% of poor children and more than 80% of low-income children live in families with at least one worker. And mothers' work effort during their children's earliest years has increased sharply over the years since the War on Poverty began, rising from one-third of mothers with a child younger than 3 years old in the labor force 40 years ago to more than 60% today. So the damaging economic insecurity experienced by nearly half of American children and their families has happened despite parents' own hard work as well as the positive effects of the War on Poverty programs.

To address this damaging insecurity, we need to build on the success of the War on Poverty *and* target the new problems created by the low-wage labor market:

- 1. Build on success.** Building on success means rejecting block grants, superwaivers, and other attempts to undermine the safety net programs—like health insurance, nutrition assistance, and refundable tax credits—that have improved lives so much, while also filling in the remaining gaps in their reach to needy people. For example, we should expand EITC to include single adults—including noncustodial parents—in low-wage jobs, a policy with bipartisan support. Building on success also means filling in the most glaring gap of all, the failure of 19 states—home to a disproportionate share of poor children and children of color—to expand Medicaid to everyone living in poverty.⁸ These states miss out on crucial opportunities to help children escape poverty intergenerationally because they fail to offer parents medical and mental health treatment that allows them to succeed as parents

and achieve their own goals at school and at work. For example, researchers have shown that untreated maternal depression can seriously endanger young children's development and learning; health coverage that gives parents access to prevention and treatment services has important positive effects for children and contributes to more economically stable families.⁹

- 2. Fix low-wage work.** Raising the minimum wage is crucial to improving families' economic security,¹⁰ and so are other reforms that target the conditions of low-wage work that undercut economic security for poor parents and their children, including the enactment of national standards for paid sick days, paid family leave, and fair job scheduling. All of these reforms have momentum around the nation today, with more than two dozen jurisdictions having passed paid sick days legislation in the last couple of years and Congress having introduced national legislation addressing all three issues. Yet far too many low-income employees (nearly half of those in the lowest 25% of wage earners) have no access to any type of paid leave—personal time, sick time, family leave, or vacation—that is, no paid time off at all.¹¹ And unpredictable, unstable, and nonstandard schedules wreak havoc on family life and on parents' economic security and upward mobility at work, creating barriers to stable child care, second jobs, further education and credentials, and stable family budgeting.¹²
- 3. Target racial and ethnic disparities.** Particularly worrying are the high rates of poverty among young adults and children of color, who will be a majority of all Americans younger than age 18 by 2021. In addition to helping all low-income families, it is crucial to target specific barriers arising from race, ethnicity, language, and immigration status. For example, the work of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) has highlighted disparities in access to K-12 education—including sharp differences between high-poverty schools (disproportionately attended by children of color) and low-poverty schools in regard to whether they offer college preparatory courses¹³—and also in access to early education, where we see startling differences in access to state programs that help low-income families pay for child care (only about 8% of Hispanic

children receive help, compared with about 13% of all children in the eligible income range).¹⁴ War on Poverty programs such as Head Start, in which the disparities are much smaller, help show the way forward. Successfully tearing down racial disparities requires setting clear national goals; targeting resources to achieve those goals, including a focus on high-need populations and geographic areas; tracking success in access and responsiveness; and holding jurisdictions accountable with both carrots (resources) and sticks.

- 4. Pay special attention to the first years of life.** The youngest children are the ones most likely to be poor in the United States, even though the research evidence about the long-term damage resulting from poverty and family stress during infancy is ever strengthening.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Ending childhood poverty requires helping both generations by enabling parents to support their families during these early years and at the same time directly supporting children's development. It also requires turning around the deep gaps in funding that have undercut the safety net for young children; Head Start reaches just half of eligible preschoolers, Early Head Start reaches a vanishingly low 4% of poor infants and toddlers, and fewer than one in six children living in families that are potentially eligible for child care assistance actually get any help. To transform the picture, we should be supporting high-quality child care and early education for all young children in economically struggling families, as in President Obama's 2015 plan to phase in child care assistance to all families with infants and toddlers and income under 200% of the poverty level over 10 years. And we need to target the highest-quality care for the most vulnerable children—sharply expanding Early Head Start, in particular. The new research about infant development should also guide reform in other programs that touch families with young children, such as cash assistance under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, and it should intensify our commitment to economic success for young adults, who are likely to be the parents of the youngest children.¹⁸

The lesson Americans should take away from the anniversary of the War on Poverty is that ambitious public programs can make an enormous difference—if we see them as a foundation, not a finish line. The next generation of antipoverty programs must build on the successes of the safety net, fix low-wage work, directly target racial and ethnic disparities, and turn the research about very young children’s vulnerability into large-scale investments.

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