



Witness Perspective

Be the Poverty Change Agent

By: Christine Krikliwy, West Region Voice of the Poor Leader

'Be the Change that you wish to see in the world' – Mahatma Gandhi

Have you ever walked down the street or driven down the road and tried to figure out if a certain individual was living in poverty? If yes, one would be amazed that it is not only the panhandler on the median or the scruffy individual on the sidewalk. Instead, they look just like you and me. They may be your neighbor or a parishioner kneeling next to you.

So in this third week of January, designated as National Poverty Month by the United States Bishops, I would like to share a couple of personal stories that have moved me and changed my perspective on poverty.

I am an usher in my church and sit by the entrance. An individual who has attended Mass on and off came in. She limps, uses a cane and is clearly dressed with slightly unkempt hair. Walking back from Communion she slowed down near me, apparently because something was bothering her.

After Mass ended, she informed me that a girl sitting two pews up laughed at her because she almost tripped. I told her that I would talk with the girl and ensure it wouldn't happen again, and she walked away.

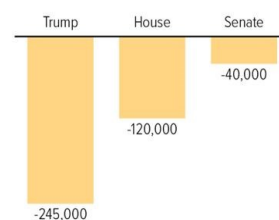
She then lingered a bit longer until the Church nearly emptied, and asked if she could talk with me. I said sure. Sitting beside me in the pew, she said she was homeless, had been raped on the street several times, now lives in her old truck, and has lost everything she had. It was a dark, cold and rainy night; I felt the weather deep inside me.

At the back of the Church, we have a St. Vincent de Paul closet with donations that are dropped off by parishioners. I took her to the closet and, as fate would have it, she was able to get a quilt, shoes and clothes. I asked if she had a phone number because I would try to find her a place to stay other than her old truck. She said that she was waiting to hear whether she would receive "Section 8" housing and asked me to wait until she heard from them.

Housing Assistance Programs, Such as Section 8, Are in Deep Danger in Federal Budget Plans

Potential Housing Voucher Losses Under 2018 Budget Plans

Number of housing vouchers not renewed



Source: CBPP analysis of Department of Housing and Urban Development and other data

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In 2027:

House would cut 1.8 million vouchers

Senate would cut 900,000 vouchers

Three weeks later, she attended Mass again. I was so happy to see her and gave her a big hug. She smiled at me. She was clean, well dressed and look liked a new person. After Church she told me that I had saved her life. She said she was on the verge of ending her life until she ran into me. She informed me that I showed her that somebody cared and that I changed her outlook on life. Currently she is living in Section 8 Housing and not in her truck.

Then there was the time I was working as an evaluator at "failing" schools in a rough and poor neighborhood with broken down homes, surrounded by squalor. Many of the children were being raised by their grandparents because their parents were in prison. Because these children often came to school hungry, they were unable to concentrate and they fought any type of structure. Through governmental grants we offered these children a "Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematic" (STEM) curriculum, with trips to the university (different labs), museums, and to the observatory on Mount Lemon to study the sun, moon and the stars. The healthy food, bus trips and knowledge that we shared made an incredible change in the lives of these children and their families/caretakers that accompanied them. Their goals changed, they wanted to attend the university, become scientists, engineers and physicians.

Following is the World Bank's description of poverty:

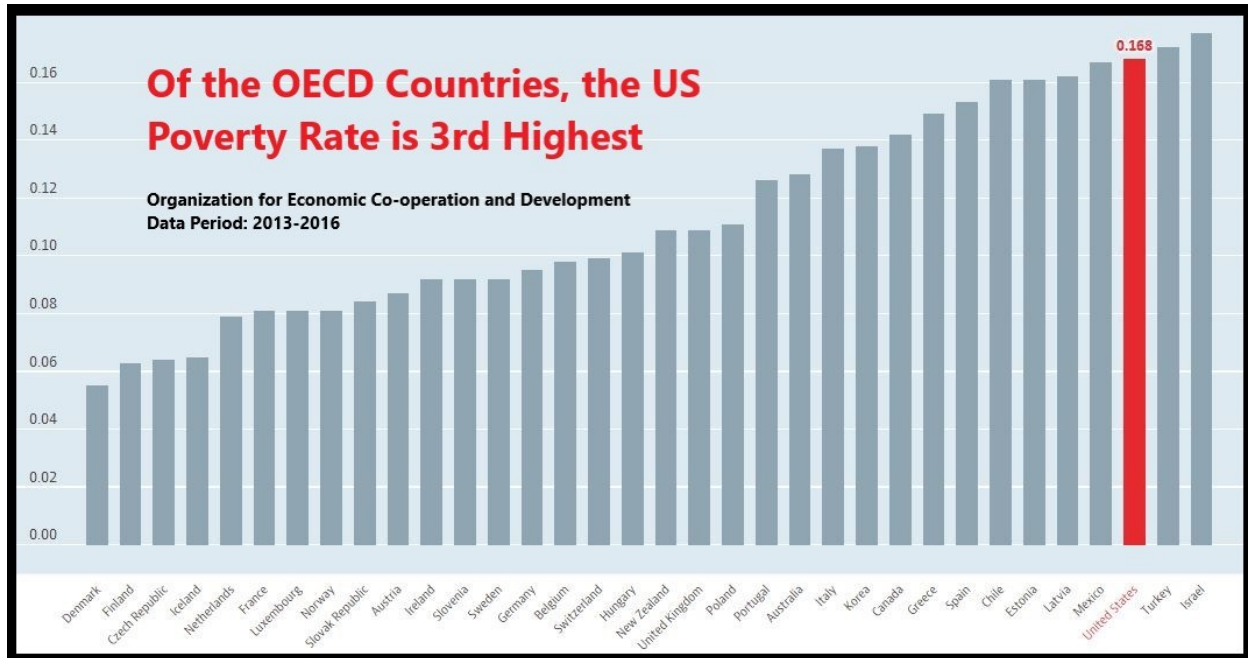
"Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time.

Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and across time, and has been described in many ways. Most often, poverty is a situation people want to escape. So poverty is a call to action -- for the poor and the wealthy alike -- a call to change the world so that many more may have enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in their communities."

People who live in poverty not only lack money but social acceptance. They find it difficult to purchase food and housing and buy needed medications. They are generally poorly educated; their children are unable to associate with fellow students (attend birthday parties, field trips and play sports); they lack integration among their peers resulting in ongoing generational poverty and isolation. The price of poverty impacts our health and justice system negatively. Simply being poor and dealing with that reality damages how one thinks of oneself with devastating implications on the person's mental health and prospects for climbing out of poverty, as a [recent illuminating article, "The Psychology of Inequality," in The New Yorker](#) shows.

Around the globe poverty rears its ugly face differently, even as we continue to permit its existence. It is a complex societal issue. We identify and track poverty through social indicators such as health, availability of resources, education, social exclusion and vulnerability.

Astonishingly, in the United States, the rate of poverty is the third highest of the countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as measured by the percentage of people earning less than half the national median income (see chart below – for interactive detail showing poverty rates by age groups – 0-17 year-olds; 18-65 year-olds; and 66 year-olds and more – click [here](#)).



The causes are multiple, but not least among these is the affordability and availability of health insurance. [Many studies and sources](#) assert that the United States is the only highly developed industrialized country in the world that considers health coverage to be a privilege and not a right for all. Education and housing are taking larger portions of our monthly income, making everyday life an extremely expensive option.

As Vincentians we do amazing work feeding and clothing the needy. In today's world we must couple that work with the task of systemically eliminating poverty. We must become advocates and mentors for those living in poverty, not mere couriers delivering food and clothing. We need to 'BE THE CHANGE' through our many voices, experiences and education.

Luke 12:48 "To whom much is given, much will be required."

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