

Tackling Poverty

Excerpts from a Panel Discussion Hosted by City Limits and ICPH

The Tackling Poverty panel-discussion series represents a collaboration between ICPH and the New York–based civic-journalism organization City Limits, aimed at engaging the community on the topic of poverty and homelessness, locally and nationally. The Tackling Poverty event of January 30, 2013, held at Manhattan’s El Museo del Barrio, began with a speech by the former New York Times columnist Bob Herbert, currently a fellow at the policy and research center Demos. Herbert’s talk is excerpted below.

HERBERT: It was more than 50 years ago, at a time when John F. Kennedy was in the White House, that Michael Harrington published his groundbreaking book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. Our eyes were supposedly opened to this great problem back then. And the truth is that a lot of progress was made over the next several years. But poverty has now mounted a ferocious comeback in the United States, taking a fierce toll on tens of millions of people, many of them very young. In the years since Bill Clinton left office, the ranks of the poor have expanded by 15 million. Many of the gains made following the publication of *The Other America* have been reversed. We now have more poor people in the United States than at any time since the Census Bureau started keeping accurate records back in the 1960s. And yet our mainstream politicians hardly ever mention the subject of poverty. When public officials talk about economic issues, they’re almost always focused on the middle class. If there’s any discussion of poverty at all, it’s usually about how best to cut the already meager programs that offer the poor some assistance. ...

Nearly 50 million Americans are poor right now in 2013 in the richest nation ever to inhabit the earth. These are fellow citizens of ours: men, women, and children, who are sinking into the quicksand of ever-deepening material deprivation and isolation from society’s mainstream. Another 50 million people are what we call the near-poor. They’re hanging on just a notch or two above the official poverty line, which means they can feel the awful flames of poverty licking at their heels. The people in those two categories, the poor and the near-poor, comprise nearly a third of the entire American population. One in every five American children is poor, and one in every three black children. The United States has the highest child poverty rate in the entire industrialized world. And this is the case at a time when the economic elite in America, that small sliver of the population at the top of the economic pyramid, are enjoying riches that could have never previously been imagined in all of our nation’s history. ...

For those who might think that poverty is something that just affects black people or brown people, think again. Many of the problems we’ve long associated with the inner city can now be found in other venues. Spend a little time in some of our down-at-the-heel suburbs, or Rust Belt communities, or rural towns and villages, and you’ll see the poverty and joblessness, the broken families, the out-of-wedlock births, the drug and alcohol abuse, the domestic violence, and on and on. This is what economic deprivation has always done to people. We’re in denial about just how bad it has gotten. ...

I am here today to tell you in no uncertain terms that this near-silence on the subject of poverty needs to end. ...

Let everyone within earshot know that it is not all right to keep catering to the interests of the millionaires and the billionaires while working families are lined up at food pantries in New York and in Ohio and Pennsylvania and Missouri and just about everywhere else in these United States. ...

Now, I am not an advocate of violence; I take my cue from Dr. King. But I am an advocate of militancy. ... We need to protest. We need to badger the media to pay more attention to the poor and the unemployed and the young people of America whose futures are being so cruelly curtailed by the unfairness of this economic system. ... If our approach is strategic and smart, and our hearts and minds are strong, it is a fight that we can win. It’s a fight that we should make. In my view, it’s a fight that we must make.

Following Bob Herbert’s speech was a panel discussion moderated by television news anchor David Novarro of WABC-TV in New York. The panelists were Dona Anderson, director of the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness; Melissa Boteach, director of Half in Ten and the Poverty and Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress; Maya Wiley, founder and president of the Center for Social Inclusion; and Christopher M. Brown, director of legislative affairs at PolicyLink. Excerpts of the panelists’ comments have been edited for clarity.

NOVARRO: Do we have the will at this point to do anything about poverty? Christopher.

BROWN: There are a few great leaders who have taken that leadership role. I think as a body, particularly in my context in Washington, D.C., the answer is no. The political will to really address poverty in a way that gets to the heart of the solutions—right now, unfortunately, the answer would be no.

WILEY: I certainly agree with Chris that we have a failure of political will in terms of elected officials, but I think that's very different from the public's political will. I think one of the things we're seeing, given the hard times that so many people have faced and ... that they've seen family members, friends, neighbors face, is that there's a lot more willingness to invest in people, which is really all we're talking about. There's a lot more will for that.

BOTEACH: I think there is some public will. I think what is missing is the advocacy and movement behind it—as Bob said, the translation into policy. You know, Franklin Roosevelt had a famous quote with a labor leader [whom he told], “Go out and make me do it.” I think we have some elected officials right now who could be persuaded to take up more of a leadership role if there was movement behind it, and we've been pushing them to take leadership for a long time. I think it's incumbent on us at this point to really mobilize ourselves and to hold them accountable for doing more on these issues.

NOVARRO: How important are jobs to the whole picture of dealing with poverty?

WILEY: Wages are obviously critically important because we have a lot of people who work in this country who are still poor. ... We'll just talk about one issue, since I was working on transportation issues in Louisiana this week. If you look at what's happening, we've been disinvesting in public transit, in fact we've been investing most of our public dollars in highways, and very little of it in public transit. And in the last year, the Congress was arguing about whether to have any public dollars go to public transit. You know, there are literally only 25 percent of low-skilled and medium-skilled jobs in this country located within 90 minutes of public transit. And in the black community—also the Latino community—we're six times more likely to rely on public transit to get to work. So it's a jobs question in terms of creating the jobs, but it's also a jobs question in terms of accessing the jobs.

ANDERSON: To piggyback on what Maya was talking about, it's not only being able to get to the jobs, but also being able to get the jobs in the first place. If we have close to half of our young people not graduating from high school in New York City, what kind of jobs can we expect for them to get that are going to be



Maya Wiley (left), founder and president of the Center for Social Inclusion, engages with attendees following the panel discussion.

able to have them support and maintain strong stable households and families? They don't have the skills they need in order to get the jobs in the first place. That's another access question as well.

NOVARRO [TO BOTEACH]: If you could tell me a little bit about your program, we were saying before that ... poverty's gonna be halved in ten years. I mean it sounds like a crazy notion—how do you do it?

BOTEACH: It's not crazy, I promise. ... One of the things we need to do is get out of this mindset of being on the defensive, because when you're in this crash defensive posture, it's very difficult to do anything other than prevent worse things from happening. We will put poverty reduction, not caseload reduction, back at the center of our programs. One of the things we did this past year is, we put out a budget plan that cut poverty in half while balancing the budget by 2030 at the same time, and made the point that it's very much about the budget choices that we make. That budgets are moral documents as much as they are economic or political documents, and that if you were to put choices next to each other. ... We show that, for example, preserving a provision in the estate tax that was helping the very, very top 0.2 percent of households keep more wealth, letting that expire would preserve 280,000 children getting school lunch for the next 10 years. I mean, when you present those kinds of choices to the American people, they're squarely on the side of investing in people.

NOVARRO: Is poverty solvable now?

WILEY: I think one of the big lies that we have been told is that poverty is intractable. ... Our own history shows that it's actually

not true, that we can create policies that invest in people. That [included] the G.I. Bill ... By 1950, the mid-1950s, the federal government was underwriting 50 percent of all home mortgages. Just not [in] black and Latino communities. And so when we talk about this permanent underclass, right, we've heard this conversation about this permanent underclass as if it's something that's always been there and will always be there. It's really about how our policies have not been fair to all the people who should have been benefiting from them. And so our failure to pay attention to communities of color and how we support community-of-color access into the middle class has become part of the myth that [the underclass is] permanent. And that somehow people who are poor are responsible for their poverty. ...

When you look at how the public conversation happens, what is happening actually is [that] a very small percentage of the political right is controlling the conversation about what the public wants. And when you look at polls, in California, there was a poll that found that the majority of Californians would favor paying more in taxes for public education and that a disproportionate amount of those public-education dollars should go to disadvantaged schools. So that tells me that this whole debate about public will is more about the attention that the very few get, because they're able to be politically mobilized in a very effective way and garner a significant percentage of the press. That is very different from any of the conversations that we have when we're just in homes, when we're in communities, and when we even look at polling and other testing that shows what Americans are willing to pay for.

NOVARRO: Dona, let me direct this at you. Where do we focus our resources right now?

ANDERSON: The bang for your buck is in early childhood education. ... We have to stop thinking about our budgets and the money that we spend on public programs as expenses and start thinking of them as investments. You're not spending on child care, you are investing in child care, and we have to get politicians—they may know this but they have to speak about it in that way and they have to lead in that way. They have a voice that no one else has. More people will listen to them. And they have an opportunity to craft that message. And if they can understand that if you do this now, for five years, you will see a lifetime of benefits. ... If as a private business owner, if I had a return on investment at the same rate that you see with early childhood [education], I would do it in a heartbeat. There's just no argument.

NOVARRO: There's a lot of reasons to fight poverty, a lot of reasons to invest in our people, our young, a lot of reasons to invest in the family, but we don't. Why is that?

BROWN: We're not a poor country; we need to stop acting like it. And I think that really just encapsulates everything that we're saying here today. The money is there, [but] we're choosing to

put it in different places and not in others. It's really about the choice, and back to Maya's point, it's our job to make that will at the forefront of the political debate.

NOVARRO: Let's talk about something that works. How do we get that message out?

BROWN: Several projects that we work on, both locally and nationally, exemplify what you're asking. One is right here up the street, in Harlem, New York. Most people here are familiar, I'm pretty sure, with the Harlem Children's Zone, where Geoffrey Canada and his team were able to essentially help crack the code on what it means for a child living in poverty to do well in school and to actually break the generational cycle of poverty. And so a good part of my day and my work is to help find ways to help other communities do the same thing.

NOVARRO: Talk to me, Maya, in terms of the impact that racism has on poverty.

WILEY: A lot of [racism] is actually unconscious. In other words, there's studies that show that if you have a résumé with a person's name on it that sounds Afrocentric, and you have a name of a person [that] sounds very white, and they are identical résumés in terms of educational background, skills, and experience, the data shows that it is the white person who will get the interview and the black person, the person with the name that sounds black, will not even get the interview. Often the interviewer's not even necessarily conscious that they're weeding that way, right? So I think one of the things that we get confused about [in] society is that if people of color are being excluded from opportunity, then it must mean there's some Bull Connor-type person who is intentionally keeping people from opportunity. It's actually much more complicated. But it's also much more complicated from a policy front, because so often we have a race-neutral policy that's universal and sounds really good. It doesn't mean we'll all benefit from it equally, and I'll give you one example. I think it's incredibly important that we pass the Affordable Care Act. But we have a lot of experience with communities of color being on Medicaid and they don't get to see doctors because they don't have the health-care infrastructure in the communities. So simply having a race-neutral policy that says, "Oh, now everybody who's 133 percent or below the poverty line will now have the ability to have an insurance card," there's a study that shows that insurance only counts for 42 percent of a black or Latino person's ability to get health care. And that's because there are all these other issues of infrastructure, whether doctors are in the community. Most of our communities now have hospitals closing, and this is for a lot of reasons that have to do with the economics of health care, but are nonetheless hitting our communities very, very differently.

Even the issue of education is a critically important issue. We have to have early childhood [education]. I went to an inner-city public school in Washington, D.C. I was one of the

on the Homefront

only students in a school with thousands of kids that was not on welfare. I had two parents who had graduate degrees. I started kindergarten knowing how to read. By second grade, I was two years behind grade level, and I was at the top of my class, and that wasn't about my early-childhood experience, that was about how the schools were so disinvested—you can't have six teachers in one year and learn. You can't have teachers that are teaching 30 kids without even one paraprofessional, no support on learning disabilities, and expect any student to do well. Any student. And all the statistics show that by third grade, particularly for students of color, student achievement plummets, and a lot of that is fixable, but it's also not race-neutral, and it's also not about racism, it's not about people wanting bad things to happen to students of color, and so we have to really be willing to look at race and understand it's not about pointing a finger, it's about solving a problem.

NOVARRO: Dona, I'm going to direct a question to you. What is the reality of what's going on in the city out there right now when it comes to homelessness?

ANDERSON: Well, it's not a pretty picture. We have recently broken the record for the number of kids who are homeless and in shelter in New York City, that's over 20,000 children. When we look at the real picture of what homeless kids face, it's not only kids who are living in shelters, it's kids who are doubled up, it's kids who are living in unstable situations, hotels, motels, cars, etc. Just in New York City, that number's about seven percent, and when you do the math, what that actually means is that there's more than one homeless child in every single classroom in New York City. On average, of course. But, still, that's the scope of the problem that we're talking about. We're talking about kids here. There's a [homeless] singles population, of course, and they have often times different challenges than what some of our families face. But [we must] remember that this is a children's issue, that this is a child's problem. A parent can make all kinds of bad decisions about how they live their life, but that three-year-old never gets a chance to be three years old again. ...

The federal funding for the McKinney-Vento Act that funds services for homeless kids across the country is 65 million dollars, million with an M, not with a B. Sixty-five million dollars for all the homeless kids in K to 12 in America. This is scandalous. ...

We're seeing a lot of folks who have clawed their way into the middle class and are falling back into the shelter system and into services, through foreclosures, the economic crisis, there's a lot of factors that go into that, but all the services and the programs we're talking about here today really can have a huge impact in helping to make sure that these kids get to keep their childhood.

NOVARRO: One of the big hot topics became the issue of the role of government in dealing with poverty, the role of government in dealing with some of these safety-net programs. What do

you think, Chris? You're dealing with policy all the time, legislators. How much of it is about the government stepping in, how much is it about the common man stepping up?

BROWN: It's about both. It has to be about both ... particularly around local government, and I think Maya hit on it earlier: if you look historically, the government has always played a central role.

NOVARRO: Should it?

BROWN: Yeah, I haven't heard the other reasonable alternative when it comes to who's gonna maintain the streets and who's gonna fund public schools, who's going to make sure that the tax code is fair for those who don't make over a certain amount. If it's not the government's role, I mean, again, who would regulate that type of thing? I think there's some common denominators, though, where we've seen some policies that can be implemented through the government that really [disprove] the commentary about the role of government or that it costs too much. It doesn't cost anything to have the right people at the table, for instance. It doesn't take much to make sure that your approaches to policy actually are targeted to specific communities and that you're not trying to make a one-size-fits-all approach to tackling poverty or addressing any of the major issues we're talking about. And the other piece here is around "evidence-based." No one is asking for, you know, a bunch of money to go out the door without any accountability.

WILEY: I think you raise a really good subject in our political debate, which is, are people poor because of their own failure to make a good choice, or to be willing to work, or are people poor because we've not set in place sufficient supports that help people actually help themselves. One of the things that happened has actually been—I think it's really important to understand this—it's been a concerted strategy by some who don't believe in big government or social programs, because it's a myth that anybody in Congress is opposed to big government. The question is, big government for what? Is it big government for military and for the criminal justice system? Or is it a big government for people? Because actually we, the same folks that claim that government should not be big, are the same folks that have ensured its massive expansion for killing people and incarcerating people. So it's a false discussion, it's really a discussion that's been an attack on government, and an attack, actually, on individual responsibility, suggesting people don't want to be and aren't doing the right thing. So ignore a woman who's working 12 hours a day and still cannot pay the food bill at the end of the month. Right? We're ignoring her. I think ... it has been a concerted strategy to create this dichotomy of big government versus small government, and one of the things that President Obama did ... really well for 2008, that he did not repeat throughout his administration after that inauguration speech, was to say it's not about big government or small government. It's about smart government. Smart government invests in solutions because at the end of the day, government is us. ■