

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

POVERTY

✦ TAVIS SMILEY

Poverty is the fundamental moral and spiritual issue of our time.

Since the ugly assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. 44 years ago, poverty has been rendered invisible. The plight of precious poor people has been reduced to a political afterthought or philanthropic gesture. Our worship at the altar of free markets and our obsession with the glitz and glutony of celebrity culture has yielded a cold and chronic indifference to the suffering of our weak and vulnerable citizens, especially our precious children. The figures are staggering. Nearly half of all Americans live in persistent poverty, new poverty, or near poverty. Almost one out of four children is poor. The younger you are in America, the more likely you are to be poor.

Have we as a nation simply come to the end of our democratic vision and practice and thereby given in to the dominant forces of greed and unfairness? One sure sign we have not succumbed to this American nightmare would be to fight for the eradication of poverty. This fight would reinvigorate American democracy and renew a sense of justice in our midst.

Our troubled society is polarized by a racial divide, class struggle, and gender strife. Still, we yearn for a moral and spiritual movement that embraces and empowers the forgotten, abandoned, and neglected.

Is not loving poor people a sure sign of our rejection of indifference, greed, and unfairness? If so, then let there be a full-fledged explosion of this love, courage, and hope in a poverty abolitionist movement.

THE TRUTH ABOUT POVERTY MUST BE AFFIRMED. Like a man with a knife in his back staggering along a crowded street without aid, the poor, especially women and children, have been stabbed with the blade of indifference. We must acknowledge the pain and stop the bleeding. Affirmation leads to validation, which compels us to action. ♦

U.S. POVERTY BY THE NUMBERS

43.6 million people were poor in 2009, up from 37.3 million in 2007. 19 million Americans live in **EXTREME POVERTY**,

The number of **UNINSURED** people in 2009 increased to 50.7 million from 46.3 million in 2008.

Between 2008 and 2009, the poverty rate for **CHILDREN** under age 18 increased from 19 percent to 20.7 percent. One child in five lives in poverty.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2010

WHO'S WEIGHING IN?



SMILEY

TAVIS SMILEY, BS'03, LHD'04: broadcaster, advocate, and philanthropist; named *Time* magazine's list of "The World's 100 Most Influential People."

