



# CHALLENGING POVERTY NARRATIVES & DECLARING WAR ON ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

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# Executive Summary

Solving economic inequality in America is not a problem of money, it is a problem of will. We have to want to prioritize waging a war against economic inequality. To do so, we have to change conventional narratives around poverty and economic inequality in America that prevent us from coming together and having a sincere conversation about what it will take to substantially reduce economic inequality and restore faith in American institutions. It seems like this conversation has to start outside of DC among the people of America, though I certainly hope some politicians will join in. Politicians, who because of self-interest (i.e., who gets the credit,) are unable to even unite within their parties on major social welfare issues, let alone across party lines, are unlikely to lead the charge. Unity for them only seems possible when they are attacking the other party, but almost never on major social welfare issues facing Americans. In fact, they seem to avoid these conversations in favor of party attacks.

It appears that the type of non-partisan, non-political conversations that can lead to actual policies being enacted, need to happen in the public domain first, then it will have to be forced on politicians. This paper attempts to approach the topic of economic inequality in a way that hopefully every person can engage in the conversation. Equally important as the facts and research are to fostering such a conversation, are the lived experiences of Americans. These experiences matter for how people interpret findings from research. So, as important as it is to report the facts, it is just as important to discuss how facts align with people's everyday experiences. To ignore these experiences is to come across as out of touch, which might not matter in political and academic circles, but it matters when it comes to bringing about narrative change and uniting people behind a war on economic inequality.

The American people have to understand that by not waging war on economic inequality and allowing childhood poverty to persist, that it comes at a high cost to them not only financially but also on the psyche of the country. Further, somewhat ironically, they have to understand that money spent on fighting economic inequality actually yields a strong return on investment. What this suggests is that the smart financial choice is to invest in eradicating economic inequality in America as opposed to delaying and saying we cannot afford to at this time, and of course this time never comes. Delaying only allows economic inequality to continue to grow, tearing at the fabric of America. Delaying leaves us as a people more susceptible to tropes within our borders and beyond, further dividing us and bringing into question our democracy.

The following eight narratives are discussed in this paper:

1. Wealth transfers are unamerican
2. Labor market participation engenders opportunity
3. Poverty in America isn't all that bad
4. Poor people are either income poor or asset poor
5. Are institutions or individuals to blame? + Elements of culture of poverty
6. Poor people only value the present + Elements of culture of poverty
7. The wealthy have better outcomes; they must work harder than the poor
8. Poor people have formed a set of values that perpetuates poverty across generations (i.e., culture of poverty)

Certainly, these are not the only narratives preventing a sincere conversation around solving economic inequality in America but changing these narratives would represent a good start to such a conversation.

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Conventional Narrative	Narrative Change	Implication(s)
Wealth transfers are unamerican	Wealth transfers are an integral and important part of American economic history	America is not a stranger to wealth transfers. In the 19th Century there was the Homestead Act and in the 20th Century there was the GI Bill. In the 21st Century there has yet to be such a wealth transfer, it is time.
Labor market participation engenders opportunity	Labor market participation (i.e., work) is not the same as opportunity	While there are truly limits on what businesses can pay, and society does need some cheap options, there are ways to both make it possible to provide cheap goods while assuring wages for working these jobs better align with the efforts of poor families and the promise of the American dream. Examples of these types of programs are the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Guaranteed Income, and Child Tax Credit programs.
Poverty in America isn't all that bad	America has children who have substantially less than other children in America and this is an existential threat to the existence of meritocracy	In America, social welfare policies should be designed to provide poor people with "something to live for".
Poor people are either income poor or asset poor	Eradicating economic inequality requires both income and asset solutions	While income provides the foundation from which to catapult families out of poverty, assets are the fuel that empowers people to not only move out of poverty but pursue happiness. From this perspective, income and asset policies have to be understood as a single strategy for eradicating economic inequality as opposed to separate strategies for different problems.
Are institutions or individuals to blame? + elements of culture of poverty	Institutions need to focus on their role in solving economic inequality and individuals on theirs	From this perspective, institutions, regardless of what individuals are or are not doing, must focus on doing what they are responsible for. The same goes for individuals.
Poor people only value the present + elements of culture of poverty	Future orientation is a luxury owning assets provides the wealthy	Assets provide children with the resources needed to begin planning for their futures. When children have assets of their own, they can begin to visualize their future selves going to college, buying a home, starting a business, or retiring one day. Nurturing our children's future selves is important for motivating them to invest their effort and ability into the American way of life. Dreams buoyed by well-funded asset policies (e.g., large dollar Children's Savings Accounts) allow a child to withstand hardship whether it be poverty, war, or even a pandemic.
The wealthy have better outcomes; they must work harder than the poor	Society has unreasonable expectations for poor children that asks them to act irrationally	America needs social welfare policies that provide poor children with lived experiences that align better with society's normative expectations for them (such as attending some form of postsecondary education, opening a business, developing a new innovation, serving in the military, and so on).
Poor people have formed a set of values that perpetuates poverty across generations (i.e., culture of poverty)	Poor children are often simply responding logically to their situation, not replicating "cultural" behaviors	Wealth empowers people by giving them the ability to purchase or access tools humans have created to enhance their ability making success in mainstream institutions more likely. Social welfare policy in America should provide poor children with assets so that they can act from an empowered position within American institutions.

## CONCLUSION

What has made America great is simple and timeless, it is the expectation that every person through hard work, and if they have the requisite ability, can better their economic lot in life (i.e., move up the economic ladder). It is the opportunity to bet on yourself that leads people to America and makes it great. And while it is popular now-a-days to downplay the importance of the American dream, it is the belief in this dream that has carried Americans through their toughest times as a people. This is not a dream about making it through the day. It is a promise that every American has the opportunity to have a better tomorrow. To make America great again and restore faith in American institutions, we must declare war on inequality.

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