

OPINION

Widespread Poverty that's Hard to See

Shredding the safety net

BY WILLIAM A. COLLINS

There's widespread poverty in America today, though it's sometimes hard to see how bad it is.

Real estate development techniques and zoning rules, plus a healthy dollop of discrimination, force most poor people to live and work in neighborhoods many of us don't often visit.

"As a rich guy, let me tell you I haven't seen any poor people around my gated community," quipped Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert in a recent segment. He also skewered a report from the right-wing Heritage Foundation that portrays U.S. poverty as a misnomer since so many poor Americans own both microwaves and refrigerators.

But poverty is a major problem in



the United States. About 15 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line, which at \$22,350 for a family of four is pretty destitute to start with, and median family income is declining.

In some ways it's actually better to live in a poor region of the country because prices there are lower. In other ways, rich regions are preferable because there are more jobs. But because of income segregation, poor kids are pretty likely to attend crummy schools no matter where they live.

Luckily for the poor, some presidents try to make a difference. Thus, over the decades we have built the programs that constitute the U.S. safety net. Examples include welfare (currently known as "Temporary Assistance for Needy Families"), public housing, unemployment compensation, food stamps,

Medicaid, heating assistance, earned income tax credits, and subsidized school lunches.

But now, the safety net is tattered. States and the federal government, for want of adequately taxing the rich, are broke. Services for the poor are getting decimated.

Safety net expenditures help us maintain our shaky claim to being a civilized nation. That claim was once important to Americans. Now, however, our president and Congress not only support waging wars of conquest abroad but also shredding our safety net at home. As a result, homelessness is on the march, unemployment is epidemic, and obesity rages in low-income quarters where cheap, unwholesome food is all that many citizens can afford.

This helps explain why James Verone recently got into the news. He's the guy from North Carolina who passed a bank teller a note

demanding one dollar. Upon receipt thereof he sat down to await the police. Duly carted away he explained that he badly needed health care and had to go to jail to get it. Being a nonviolent offender, he will likely be released soon as his state closes its prisons to free up cash, and thus will once again be allowed to die at his own convenience.

With so many people impoverished, you might think that this would be a self-correcting political problem. The rascals responsible for this problem are easy enough to spot. We can just vote them out, right?

But that's not so easy. Voting is constantly being made harder for the poor. Many states have tightened voter identification requirements, effectively levying poll taxes, while others have increased the inconvenience of registration. In many places, a criminal record

may disqualify you for good. Besides, if you're poor or struggling to feed a family, you often have higher priorities on Election Day. Like working.

And so, while our major corporations are squirreling away hordes of cash, much of it overseas, the ranks of poor Americans are growing. Republicans prefer to protect the rich. President Barack Obama hasn't gotten around to ending the wars he inherited, and has started new ones. Serious cuts therefore have to come from "services," and that means from you-know-whom.

As long as the poor remain invisible and voiceless (a likely prospect to say the least), homelessness and hunger will continue to grow. Aid agencies might as well distribute beds that fit into old cars.

OtherWords columnist William A. Collins is a former state representative and a former mayor of Norwalk, Conn.

What about the America's Poor?

Food stamps in the crosshairs

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

In recent weeks, the nation has been bombarded with nonstop media coverage of the debt ceiling debate.

Congress and the President could not seem to come to an agreement over how to best protect the nation's credit rating and control the national deficit. We were told, repeatedly, that if the debt ceiling wasn't increased, America's global borrowing power would be negatively affected and that the economy would suffer.

At the 11th hour, Congress voted on and the President signed a cobbled together plan that ensured America could continue to borrow money to pay its debts. People across the country breathed a collective sigh of relief. Or did they?

In the midst of all this talk about America's borrowing power and America's place in the global

economy, very little, if anything, was said about the needs of the country's poor. Perhaps our elected officials are unaware that nearly 46 million people are receiving food stamp benefits. In Alabama, 36 percent of that state's population receives food stamps; that's a 120 percent increase over last year.

What we did hear during these debt debates was Republicans saying that America must slash its budget, cutting programs that support the poor in the process, in an effort to get the growing deficit under control. Democrats and the President say they support the poor, but in the interest of getting the debt ceiling increased, were willing to put the very programs they swore to protect on the table.

If these programs are cut in any way, how will families feed their children?

With more people out of work and millions of Americans set to lose their unemployment benefits this fall, it's safe to assume that

food stamp usage will only rise in the coming months. What is being done to help these people?

While we all understand that a shrinking middle class is not good for our economy, and feel for the millions who lost their homes and suffered huge losses to their 401ks and investments, we can no longer allow our government to act as if that is the only class that matters.

With more and more middle class families slipping into poverty—many of them minorities—it is more critical than ever that we truly support our nation's poor and fund programs that will uplift them.

America is spending a lot of time trying to figure out how to 'save' itself from economic turmoil and has, as a result, invested billions to stabilize business sectors that were operating on shaky ground. More attention must now be spent on providing a safety net for its people.

Greg Mathis is a former Michigan District Court judge and currently is a syndicated television show judge.

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