

Comments by Gene Nichol, Director of the UNC Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at HKonJ (Historic Thousands on Jones Street) People of Color Justice and Unity Legislative Day, May 23, 2012.

We have many challenges in North Carolina. Many and daunting. But none approaches the tragedy that here, in the wealthiest nation on earth, the wealthiest nation in human history, 18% of our sisters and brothers live in wrenching poverty. Poverty amidst plenty. 25% of our innocent children.

Almost 40% of our children of color live in poverty. A simple declarative sentence that shames us as a people. One that gives the lie – irrefutably – to both our foundational constitutional commitments and our central tenets of religious faith, in a single blow. To anyone paying attention, the scourge of debilitating poverty is the largest problem faced by the people of North Carolina – even if our political leaders ignore it, or declare, with a breathtaking stupidity, that it doesn't exist. Editing 1.6 million Tar Heels out of the family portrait.

Ignoring the untold tens of thousands of homeless citizens – often veterans, often employed, often with children – living under our bridges, in our forests, in our storm drains, across every corner of this asset-rich state.

Ignoring the millions turning to our over-pressed food banks – even when that means, sometimes freezing, always humiliating, overnight queues -- to secure can goods for their children.

Ignoring school kids who can't get access to decent meals, much less quality teachers, or safe classrooms, or the internet – but who we say enjoy a steely equality with the well-tutored and heavily-financed children of Chapel Hill and Myers Park. Though when we say this, we know we lie.

Ignoring the vast legions of fathers and mothers who, through no fault of their own, have been cast into a crushing unemployment that denies them the essential dignity of supporting and sustaining their families. In what Robert Kennedy called a violence of “inaction, indifference and decay” – causing “the slow destruction of a child” and the ruthless “breaking of a man's spirit by denying him the chance to stand as a father and as a man amongst other men.” And this, too, Kennedy explained, “afflicts us all.”

If we believe we are incapable of addressing these profound evils, we have lost the ambition and the confidence that marked our forebears. If we believe we could address them, but choose not to, our moral failing is complete.

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