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## Commentary

# In NC, poverty pervades as we evade

## A yearlong look at NC poverty

By Gene Nichol

Commentary January 26, 2013

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Charmain Williams, left, and her boyfriend Milton Horton sleep in sub-freezing weather inside Horton's 1994 Ford Taurus Wednesday, January 23, 2013, in a city park in Raleigh. The couple have been homeless for four months living in their car and eating at soup kitchens. Horton says he's been struggling to keep consistent employment for 5 years.

TRAVIS LONG — [tlong@newsobserver.com](mailto:tlong@newsobserver.com) [Buy Photo](#)

- By the numbers 3: Where Robeson County ranks in the nation in terms of poverty for counties over 65,000 residents  
12: Where North Carolina ranks in the nation on the number of residents living in poverty  
26: Where we ranked 10 years ago
- The series On the last Sunday of each month this year, UNC Professor Gene Nichol will examine the faces and issues behind the rising poverty numbers in North Carolina.

*Editor's note: This is Part 1 of a yearlong look at poverty in North Carolina. Gene Nichol will revisit this topic monthly.*

We speak much for equality in the United States. Our first statement as a nation attests it's a "self-evident truth" that all are "created equal." Lincoln reminded, at Gettysburg, we were "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition" of equality. Our constitution is premised on "equal protection of the laws." Allegiance is pledged, continuously, to "liberty and justice for all." We talk a good game. The best. But what we do has little in common with what we say.

The statistics of American poverty are straightforward and astonishing. In the richest nation on earth, over 15 percent of us fall below the stingy federal poverty standard – \$23,000 annually for a family of four. We have, this morning, more poor people in poverty, in raw numbers, than at any moment in our long history; more, on a percentage basis, than at any time in a quarter century.

Our poverty is skewed sharply by race. Almost 30 percent of African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans are poor. It is also skewed by age. The youngest among us, the most vulnerable, are the poorest. Twenty-two percent of American children live below the poverty line; 35 percent of our children of color.

### Stark inequality

International comparisons are bleak. We countenance greater levels of poverty, especially child poverty, than any other advanced industrial democracy. We produce the most daunting income differentials – gaps between rich and poor – as well. We're the richest, the poorest and the most unequal advanced nation in the world.

In North Carolina, things are worse. Eighteen percent, 1.7 million of us, live in poverty. Twenty percent have no health care coverage. We have the 12-highest poverty rate in the country – though only a decade ago we were 26th. A quarter of Tar Heel children live in poverty; 40 percent of our children of color. The top one-fifth of our households capture more income than the bottom 80 percent put together.

Over a half-million of our households, last year, participated in the food stamp program. In Robeson County, that included 33 percent of families, the third-highest figure in the nation in counties over 65,000.

The federal government reports that 10 Eastern North Carolina counties demonstrate “persistent poverty”: Bertie, Bladen, Columbus, Halifax, Martin, Northampton, Pitt, Robeson, Tyrell and Washington. That means at least 20 percent of their residents lived in poverty every day for the past 30 years. In most, they could as easily have said 150 years – in a line tracing back to slavery.

In some sense, we know this. Or at least we've had it repeated to us, in perhaps paler versions, many times. Each year, the Census Bureau releases an array of poverty figures.

Newspapers report them dutifully, usually in a brief, single-column story, in a secondary section. No surprise is registered. No emergency is triggered. We seem comfortable with a dramatic, if long-lived, mixture of racial and economic apartheid.

Part of the reason, no doubt, is that poverty statistics are just that — numbers. Data from tedious reports. Ripe for the forgetting.

But poverty isn't just a number. It's a draining of the body, a wound to the soul. Amid such plenty, it is a willful marginalization, an infliction of demeaning indignity. It divides and diminishes, as it rejects. It is a regime of harm that ought to be rendered plain, incapable of being ignored.

### Numb to numbers

To that end, to push past bloodless statistics, workers at the poverty center I direct and an array of colleagues spent much of last year – with journalists, videographers, funders, academics, policymakers, students, community leaders and ministers – striving to put a face on the often-unseen economic hardship of our state.

Through the leadership of the Rev. William Barber of the NC-NAACP, a “Truth and Hope Poverty Tour” traveled over 2,000 miles, meeting in 27 towns and cities, speaking with thousands of North Carolinians – many of whom live, at best, in the shadows.

What we witnessed stunned us all. It demeaned us all. I can't capture it for you. I wish I could. But I'm no James Agee.

### A deeper look

In this series, appearing throughout 2013, I will drill more deeply than could be managed in the months of the tour, into arenas of deprivation and exclusion that many North Carolinians will find disturbing, into conditions and circumstance that present untenable gaps between what we say and what we do.

I'll examine homelessness in our cities – among veterans, children and other wounded souls – that mocks our duties to one another. I'll detail electric rates across much of Eastern North Carolina that shock the conscience – in a bold and cruel irony that demands the poorest pay the most for the bare necessities of life, subsidizing their wealthier neighbors.

I'll try to understand, and highlight, racial and economic environmental injustice in Brunswick County so pronounced it creates second- and third-class communities. I'll look at tiny North Carolina hamlets, driven by hardship, unable to secure the resources and infrastructure necessary to craft more promising futures. I'll argue that our marginalization of extraordinary, often inspiring, immigrant communities betrays both our future and our best selves.

Most of my focus will be east of I-95. Our hardship is not equally distributed. But much of North Carolina's most intense poverty, we'll see, is found in the center cities of Durham, Raleigh, Charlotte, Greensboro and Winston-Salem. Our urban poverty is deep even when it is not wide.

My hope, finally, is that the plight of those lodged at the bottom might be placed center-stage in our efforts to build, in Frank Graham's words, "a fresher and nobler civilization in this ancient commonwealth."

Gene Nichol is Boyd Tinsley distinguished professor at the UNC School of Law and director of the school's Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity. A former dean of the UNC School of Law, Nichol served as president of the College of William and Mary from 2005 to 2008.

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