

This is Google's cache of <http://www.newsobserver.com/2012/10/31/2452849/the-missing-anti-poverty-campaign.html>. It is a snapshot of the page as it appeared on Feb 27, 2015 23:23:28 GMT. The [current page](#) could have changed in the meantime. [Learn more](#)

Tip: To quickly find your search term on this page, press **Ctrl+F** or **⌘-F** (Mac) and use the find bar.

[Text-only version](#)

# NewsObserver.com

## Point of View

# The missing anti-poverty campaign

By Gene Nichol

October 31, 2012

- Facebook
  -
- Twitter
  - 
  -
- [Google Plus](#)
- More
  - [Linkedin](#)
  - [Reddit](#)
  - [YouTube](#)
  - 
  - [E-mail](#)
  - [Print](#)
  - 
  -

Three undisputable, but contradictory, facts lie at the vortex of American poverty.

First, this is the wealthiest nation on earth. Second, we countenance higher levels of poverty, especially child poverty, than any remotely comparable country. Third, Americans believe, with steely determination, this is the fairest society – the most committed to equality and “justice for all” – the world has ever known.

A facile and energetic mind can square much that collides. But not these three realities. It's impossible to be the richest, the poorest, and the fairest all at once. How do we manage it?

Broadly speaking, by both circumstance and design, we make the poor invisible to the wider majority.

Our kids are doing fine, and our friends' kids, and theirs. Sure, there may be poverty afoot, even deprivation so significant it challenges the aphorisms of equal opportunity and dignity we daily profess, but it's on the other side of the tracks, or the county, or the commonwealth. Since we don't confront it, we assume its nonexistence. We needn't address what we don't see. We can thus remain content and boastful in our hollow pledges and declarations.

This is why it is crucial to place the scourge of North Carolina poverty center stage in our politics. It also highlights the disappointment of our fast-concluding governor's race. Walter Dalton and Pat McCrory have proposed much, discussed much, fought much – but not about plans to lift Tar Heels out of poverty.

Melinda Lawrence of the N.C. Justice Center, Dr. William Barber of the N.C.-NAACP and I have written to the candidates, invited them to meetings with folks struggling under economic duress, asked them to attend summits exploring the challenges of poverty and even implored debate moderators to press the issue. No dice.

Let me give just a couple of examples of what this stony silence means:

- Eleven years ago, North Carolina had the 26th-highest poverty rate in the U.S. Last year, we were 13th. We are frantic about our competitive posture in relation to other states on an endless array of fronts. Why are we seemingly unconcerned that we rapidly and dramatically lose ground, compared to our colleagues, in effective efforts to fight poverty?
- Forty percent of our children of color – African-American, Latino and Native American – now live in wrenching poverty. Think that over for a second. No other advanced, economically powerful, Western democracy would put up with anything like that. Why do we? And, regardless of what one thinks the best solution to this crushing challenge may be, what explains the failure to even name it as a problem?

A few weeks ago, I spoke to a large gathering of North Carolina Head Start teachers in Morganton. I knew they wouldn't learn much from me. But I was confident I'd learn a good deal from them. In reviewing their conference materials, I came across a pamphlet produced by the state offices giving pointed and practical advice to teachers dealing with the over 8,000 homeless North Carolina children, 5 years old and younger. It was thoughtful and constructive. But it was impossible to read without heartbreak. Are those thousands of homeless babies worthy of a sentence or two? How about a commercial?

Of course many claim, these days, there is nothing the world's most powerful nation can do about poverty. It's not so. In 1959, before the onset of the War on Poverty, a stunning 35 percent of Americans over 65 were poor. Thirty percent of our children lived below the federal threshold. By 1975, child poverty had been cut in half, and senior poverty slashed by over 60 percent. And given the sustaining power of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, today 8 percent of those over 65 live in poverty. We didn't lose the war; as Terry Sanford put it, "we abandoned the battlefield."

There are millions of poor and low-income folks in North Carolina. They, too, are members of a democratic republic, even if cast aside and rendered invisible to our orchestrated tussles.

Frederick Douglass argued: "The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her claims have been born of earnest struggle." Power "concedes nothing without struggle. It never did and it never will."

I wish Douglass' charge didn't apply to North Carolina. But it looks like it does.

Gene Nichol is the Boyd Tinsley distinguished professor at UNC's Law School and director of the UNC Center on Poverty, Work & Opportunity.

- Facebook
- 
- Twitter
- 
- 
- [Google Plus](#)
- More

- [Linkedin](#)
- [Reddit](#)
- [YouTube](#)
- 
- [E-mail](#)
- [Print](#)
- 
- 

## Join The Conversation

News & Observer is pleased to provide this opportunity to share information, experiences and observations about what's in the news. Some of the comments may be reprinted elsewhere in the site or in the newspaper. We encourage lively, open debate on the issues of the day, and ask that you refrain from profanity, hate speech, personal comments and remarks that are off point. Thank you for taking the time to offer your thoughts.

[Commenting FAQs](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

[Email Newsletters >](#)

[Manage newsletter subscriptions](#)

[Tablets >](#)

[Apps and services for tablet devices](#)

[Mobile >](#)

[Apps and services for your mobile phone](#)

[Social Media >](#)

[Get updates via Facebook and Twitter](#)

[e-Edition >](#)

[Your daily paper delivered to your computer](#)

[Home Delivery >](#)

[Manage your home delivery account](#)

[Digital Subscriptions >](#)

[Manage your online subscriptions](#)

 [Raleigh Jobs](#)

 [Raleigh Cars for sale](#)

 [Raleigh Real Estate](#)

 [Raleigh Deals](#)

 [Raleigh Deals and Coupons](#)

