



February 19, 2018

## **Confronting Poverty**

Our discomfort with hard history and our fondness for historical fiction lead us to make bad public policy, according to historian Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries. As written by Dr. Jeffries, "...we choose to ignore the fact that when slavery ended, white Southerners carried the mindsets of enslavers with them into the post-emancipation period, creating new exploitative labor arrangements such as sharecropping, new disenfranchisement mechanisms including literacy tests and new discriminatory social systems, namely Jim Crow. It took African Americans more than a century to eliminate these legal barriers to equality, but that has not been enough to erase race-based disparities in every aspect of American life, from education and employment to wealth and well-being. Public policies tend to treat this racial inequality as a product of poor personal decision-making, rather than acknowledging it as the result of racialized systems and structures that restrict choice and limit opportunity."

Poverty is deadly, and when a government promotes policies that cuts support to struggling families and tell us to live within our means, that government is a government for the wealthy. With wages too low and the cost of living on the rise, the number of people living in poverty will continue to grow. It is easy for a rich politician to promote living within your means when they control the wealth. If poor people try to live within their means and do not borrow at high interest rates, they can't survive.

We live in a society where our government allows students to be saddled with high interest rate student loan debt. We live in a society where we have bills and not enough money to pay them. We live in a society where credit card companies make trillions off of our need to borrow at a high interest rate just to make it. We live in a society where banks make billions off of the amounts they loan to us as we try to live the American dream of homeownership.

We have to play by the rules of America, even when it seems the odds are against us. We must remember there are three systems that follow us until the day we die, and they live on as our legacy after our death. If we are going to end poverty, we need remember how our reputation, credit, and criminal background will affect how we will end the cycle of poverty in our families. I knew that immediately when I read indictment papers that said "The United States of AMERICA vs. La Shawn K. Ford" that I had to fight not just for me, but for my daughter and my entire family. I knew that being labeled a "felon" in America would immediately make it an immense challenge, if not almost impossible, to further my efforts to help end my own family's cycle of poverty and to fight to end poverty for others through public service.

How does poverty influence the problem of violence in our society? As noted by Heartland Alliance's Social Impact Research Center here in Chicago, "poverty and violence often intersect, feed one another, and share root causes. Neighborhoods with high levels of violence are also characterized by high levels of poverty, lack of adequate public services and educational opportunity, poorer health outcomes, asset and income inequality, and more. The underlying socioeconomic conditions in these neighborhoods perpetuate both violence and poverty."

"Furthermore, trauma can result from both violence and poverty. Unaddressed trauma worsens quality of life, makes it hard to rise out of poverty by posing barriers to success at school and work, and raises the likelihood of aggressive behavior. In this way, untreated trauma—coupled with easy gun availability and other factors—feeds the cycle of poverty and violence," as written by the Social Impact Research Center.

How does this affect us as our children grow up in our communities? Research suggests that exposure to the constant stresses and dangers of poverty actually changes people's brains. Al Race, the deputy co-director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University says children who grow up in and remain in poverty are doubly affected. But the sections of the brain in question are also known to be particularly "plastic," Race said, meaning they can be strengthened and improved well into adulthood. So we have hope.

Black people - we must end the cycle of poverty if we want to end the cycle of unemployment and violence for blacks in America.

What can be done in public policy and in government? Governments can remove structural barriers to opportunity through policy reforms, strategic investments, and improved coordination to deepen impact.

We recently celebrated President's Day in America. I salute President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In his 1937 inaugural address, FDR declared, "the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little".

This is my kind of government. The test of America's progress is in the hands of the top 0.1% in the U.S. who have almost as much as wealth as the bottom 90%. We must fight to end poverty in Illinois and all over the world. The racial and social divides continue to play into the hands of the wealth holders of this country. It's harder to be successful as a child or a parent when you are living in poverty. During this election session - if you want real change, we must hear how candidates will address poverty in Illinois. It's the big elephant in the room. Let's stand together and defeat poverty, and we will see what democracy looks like.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'La Shawn K. Ford', with a stylized, sweeping flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford  
State Representative-Eighth District