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Poverty war lost

Poor people persists in Miami-Dade while unemployment falls in the county

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America has 99 problems, and poverty is one.

At the National Youth Summit's war on poverty discussion, experts rapped about poverty's causes and solutions in a numbers battle. At the discussion's center was President Lyndon Johnson 1964 declaration "to not only relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it." Many of President Johnson's programs including food stamps, job corps, Medicaid, Medicare and Head Start existing today. 51 years later, the question is: Do we need a new war on poverty? The panelists at this summit said yes, but differed how to execute the war and what it would entail.

Carmack Waterhouse professor of law and public policy at Georgetown University Law Center Peter Edelman said that President Johnson wasn't just interested in poverty but civil rights. He referenced how the anti-discrimination act of 1964 improved employment opportunities for African-Americans, citing that in the 1960s, Black poverty went down from 55 percent to 32 percent.

The summit, facilitated by the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, allows American middle and high school students nationwide to be among audience members and participants in national conversations about indelible events in America's history that shape the present. HistoryMiami, a Smithsonian Institution affiliate, hosted students in the Stephen P. Clark Miami-Dade County Commission Chamber, in addition to an online audience of 33 states, Yemen and Ireland.

POVERTY BY THE NUMBERS

The Census Bureau defines poverty for a family of four as living with an annual income below \$23,050 and adjusted according to household size. The youngest are the poorest in the county. Bloomberg News in 2014 reported that some Miamians live on \$11 per day.

Almost one fifth of Miami-Dade County's 2.7 million residents live in poverty. In Miami-Dade zip code 33127, almost 80 percent of the residents are deeply poor, according to City-Data.com. In October 2013, the Department of Regulatory and Economic Resources Planning Research

Section reported that poverty in Miami-Dade hovered at around 20 percent and was not improving even as the Great Recession ended and unemployment fell.

“... since 2010 the unemployment rate has steadily decreased with no matching fall in the poverty rate,” the report said.

“One of the things we need to look at is how big the war on poverty has gotten,” said Michael Tanner, senior fellow at the Cato Institute. “The fact is the federal government has 126 separate anti-poverty programs today. We spent about \$688 billion last year on those programs, about \$300 billion at the state level. To go back to 1965 from \$22 trillion fighting poverty, the standard poverty rates are about the same level as they were in 1965.”

Poverty and Prosperity Program vice president at the Center for American Progress Melissa Boteach countered: “One of the issues is that a lot of times when people talk about poverty, they use a poverty rate that doesn’t take into account the interventions that are made from the war on poverty. I’d say the war on poverty has been a success. If you look at the outcomes, a lot more people are a lot better off.”

NO MONEY, MORE PROBLEMS

Miami is one of the most expensive cities to live in. On average, rent consumes 43 percent of household income, so Dr. Shed Boren, a panelist and Camillus Health and Camillus House new CEO is kept pretty busy. He shared the story of a homeless man who worked hard and saved \$2,000 to move into an apartment only to be told no matter how much money he presented, the landlord would never rent to him because of his credit.

“I thought it was going to be a single ethnic group, episodic and mostly male,” said Boren. “But there’s mental illness and the breakdown of the family.”

The national minimum wage is \$7.25; in Florida, it’s \$8.05. Boteach discussed how in the 1960s, people worked at the mills and supported their families and that raising minimum wage to \$12 was part of the poverty solution. She said that if there are not enough good jobs for people with degrees than all the education in the world isn’t going to get those people out of poverty.

“In the 1960s, about 25 percent of mothers were bread winners or co-bread winners for their families. Today two-thirds rely on the mother’s income,” said Boteach. “We’re the only developed nation that doesn’t have basic labor standards like paid family leave, paid sick days so parents don’t have to make impossible choices when caring for their kids or missing a day’s work.”

The discussion showed there needs to be a new a war on poverty, but there is room for new weaponry. When panelist 14-year-old Joshua Williams was 4 he saw a man with a sign that read, “Need money, need food.” Since then, the Ransom Everglades High School student and Joshua’s Heart Foundation founder has led the distribution of 895,000 pounds of food to the poor. Williams said social media is a useful resource in reversing poverty. Team Joshua includes 1,200 youth volunteers.

“We can lower the numbers,” said Williams. “We’ve raised \$400,000 in the fight against hunger.”

LESS BLACK MEN, MORE BABIES

As a smoky Baltimore — a major city in America’s richest state — recovered from riots that subsided after six Baltimore police officers charged in the death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray, students brought up the issue of race, poverty and violence. According to a CNN report, almost 24 percent of Baltimore’s population is living below the poverty line, which is \$20,090 a year for a family of three. According to the most recent data available from the U.S. Census Bureau, for young, Black men between the ages of 20 and 24, the unemployment rate was 37 percent in 2013 and 10 percent for white men.

“We see police issues, especially now in Baltimore,” said Kevin Peralta, one of the online student moderators. “We talk about incarceration rates for African-Americans, specifically men. What do you think can be done in terms of that to sort of lower the poverty level?”

“All of the civil unrests that happened over the past nine months show us how deeply structured inequality is and how poverty is allowed to grow and reproduce itself,” said Dr. Marcia Chatelain, an associate professor in the department of history at Georgetown University.”

Tanner talked about how incarcerating millions of young Black men for small crimes like marijuana possession leads to a future without employment opportunities and the ability to provide for families. He also discussed how “you” have to give people in impoverished communities the belief to work hard, change their behavior and delay gratification to prepare for tomorrow.

“If you give birth and you’re not married, your chances of poverty are five times higher than if you wait to get married before you have children,” said Tanner. “It’s not a moral judgement, it’s an economic one. In the 1960s, about 17 percent of African-Americans were born out of wedlock. Today it’s almost two-thirds.”