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Poverty in America: A Crisis Ignored

Neither President Obama Nor GOP Making Poor an Issue

By Leonard Fein



No Caring: Mitt Romney rubbed some the wrong way with his comment that he doesn't 'care much' about the poor. But poverty is largely ignored by candidates on both sides of the aisle.

Poor Jews, the saying goes, are middle-class Jews without money. The unstated assumption is that the conventional cultural standards of the middle class are not displaced by a “culture of poverty” when Jews tumble down the class ladder. It is, however, important to remember that some Jews — estimates vary, but a reasonable guess is that in New York City alone, 200,000 or so — have not “tumbled down a ladder.” They have been in poverty all their lives.

But it's not the Jewish poor, however they came to poverty, that are here my concern. My concern is for the best-kept secret of the current political campaign. I have now watched all the Republican debates. (Some might say that's research; I think of it as punishment.) As far as I can recall, I have not heard the word "poor" or "poverty" even once, even though there are now 46 million people who meet the federal guidelines for poverty. Perhaps the candidates just don't care, although I find that hard to believe. More likely, their silence reflects their belief that the American people don't much care — or, caring, have concluded that the problems of the poor simply cannot be solved.

President Obama, as attested by his State of the Union message, has also decided to duck the poverty issue, evidently mistakenly believing that a rising tide will lift all boats. And both he and the Republican candidates have chosen silence on the imperfectly correlated issue of race.

Race: The unemployment rate for white Americans is 8%; for blacks, it is 16%. Or: The median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households. (These disparities are roughly twice as high as they were before the Great Recession.) And the unemployment rate for black youth is a staggering 47%.

Numbers can be helpful to our understanding, but nothing is more powerful than a story that illustrates the problem. So at this point, I turn to the reader and ask you to recall a personal story of a poor family of your acquaintance, preferably black or Hispanic, that will make the numbers come alive.

What? You don't know any such stories? You don't know any poor people, not even whites?

Right. We live in enclaves; me, too. Poor people really are just numbers.

All right, then; flesh and blood, this from the Huffington Post: There's Tim Cordova, laid off from his job as a manager at a McDonald's in New Mexico and now living with his wife at a homeless shelter after a stretch where they slept in their Ford Focus.

There's Bill Ricker, a 74-year-old former repairman and pastor whose home is a dilapidated trailer in rural Maine. He scrapes by with a monthly \$1,003 Social Security check. His ex-wife also is hard up; he lets her live in the other end of his trailer.

There's Brandi Wells, a single mom in West Virginia, struggling to find a job and care for her 10-month-old son. "I didn't realize that it could go so bad so fast," she says.

And there's Pembroke, Ill., a town of somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 people. The staples that once made up the town square are gone: no post office, no supermarket, no pharmacy, no barber shop or gas station. School doors are shuttered. The police officers were all laid off; a meat processing plant closed. In many places, light switches don't work and water faucets run dry. Residents let their garbage smolder on their lawn because there's no truck to take it away; many homes are burned out.

The truth is that you don't have to travel to Pembroke to encounter poverty. Search out the line at the local food pantry; there are between 30,000 and 40,000 pantries in America, helping to feed 37 million people. The pantries and the food banks that supply them are staffed mainly by volunteers. The best of the pantries and soup kitchens seek to provide not only sustenance, but also an intermission of dignity, treating their clients with the respect due all people — and perhaps especially people whose lives are assaulted by want.

Hunger is, of course, only one manifestation of our national failure. An even more sinister one just now is the refusal of our leaders and would-be leaders to so much as mention the relevant words, and the refusal of their journalist interviewers to remind them — and us — of the scandal.