

A black and white photograph of Barack Obama speaking at a podium. He is shown from the side, wearing a dark short-sleeved shirt, with his right arm extended forward. In the background, an American flag is visible, and a large, out-of-focus crowd of people is seated in front of him.

BY BARACK OBAMA

# Tackling Poverty and Inequality in America

**It's been four decades since Bobby Kennedy** crouched in a shack along the Mississippi Delta and looked into the wide, listless eyes of a hungry child. Again and again, he tried to talk to this child, but each time his efforts met only a blank stare of desperation. When Kennedy turned to the reporters traveling with him, he asked with tears in his eyes a single question about poverty in America:

“How can a country like this allow it?”

Forty years later, we're still asking that question. It echoes on the streets of Compton and Detroit and throughout the mining towns of West Virginia. It lingers with every image we've seen of the Ninth Ward and the rural Gulf Coast, where poverty thrived long before Katrina came ashore.

No matter how many times it's asked or what the circumstances are, the most American answer I can think of is:

"We can't."

In this country—of all countries—no child's destiny should be determined before he takes his first step. No little girl's future should be confined to the neighborhood in which she was born. Our government cannot guarantee success and happiness in life, but what we can do as a nation is ensure that every American who wants to work is prepared to work, able to find a job, and able to stay out of poverty. What we can do is make our neighborhoods whole again. What we can do is retire the phrase "working poor" in our time.

The challenge is greater than it has been in generations, but that's all the more reason for this generation to act. One in every eight Americans now lives in poverty, a rate that has nearly doubled since 1980. That's an income of about \$20,000 a year for a family of four. One in three Americans is now classified as low income.

Poverty is not an issue I just discovered for the purposes of a campaign, it is the cause that led me to a life of public service almost twenty-five years ago. I was just two years out of college when I moved to the South Side of Chicago to become a community organizer. I was hired by a group of churches trying to deal with steel plant closures that had devastated the surrounding neighborhoods. Everywhere you looked, businesses were boarded up, schools were crumbling, and teenagers were standing aimlessly on street corners, without jobs and without hope.

What you learn when you spend time in these neighborhoods trying to solve these problems is that there are no easy solutions and no perfect arguments. And for the last four decades, both ends of the political spectrum have been talking past one another, insisting on doing the same things with the same results year after year. But hope is not found in any single ideology.

Hope is found in what works. One of the best examples of what works is New York City's Harlem Children's Zone, an all-encompassing, all-hands-on-deck antipoverty effort that is literally saving a generation of children in a neighborhood where they were never supposed to have a chance. The philosophy behind the project is simple—if poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment, violence, failing schools, and broken homes, then we can't just treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal the entire community.

And it's working. Parents in Harlem are reading more to their children. Kids are staying in school, passing statewide tests at higher rates than other children in New York City, and heading off to college.

There's no reason this program should end at those blocks in Harlem. It's time to change the odds for neighborhoods all

across America. That's why when I'm president, I'll replicate the Harlem Children's Zone and create Promise Neighborhoods in twenty cities across the country. My Promise Neighborhoods will engage children and their parents in an achievement program with tangible goals, including a college education, strong physical and mental health outcomes, and retention of meaningful employment and parenting schools for parents. The program sites will be selected by the federal government after review of applications from cities and their existing non-profit organizations and school districts. Cities and private entities will be required to pay 50 percent of the program costs to ensure that they have a stake in the success of the effort. I will work to expand high-quality early childhood education opportunities, as well as federal college grants and loans so that more low-income children have access to education.

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My plan to combat entrenched poverty will also provide low-income families the support they need to raise their children. I'll pass my Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families legislation to provide more financial support to fathers who make the responsible choice to pay child support, crack down on the fathers who don't, and help stop the cycle of domestic violence that is destroying poor families. I'll expand the highly successful Nurse-Family Partnership program, which offers home visits by trained registered nurses to low-income expectant mothers, to cover all 570,000 first-time low-income mothers each year. This program has produced more than \$28,000 in net savings for every participating family.

In addition to tackling the effects of entrenched poverty on families and children, I will work to provide unemployed Americans with the resources, training, and economic support they need to find work and make that work pay.

I will invest \$1 billion over five years in innovative transitional jobs and career pathways programs that have been highly successful at placing the unemployed into temporary jobs, training them for permanent jobs, and then helping them move up the career ladder. This investment will be coupled with other measures to encourage the private sector, as well as state and local governments, to increase their support for these effective employment programs.

To ensure that low-income individuals can reach their jobs in a safe and reliable manner, I will work to double funding for the

federal Jobs Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program that helps low-income individuals get to their jobs and child care services. I will also work to ensure that additional federal public transportation dollars flow to the highest-need communities and that urban planning initiatives take this aspect of transportation and antipoverty policy into account.

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To make work pay, I will triple the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for full-time workers who make minimum wage, increase the EITC benefits for low-income families with three or more children, and expand EITC eligibility and benefits for childless workers. The EITC is one of the most successful antipoverty programs in history and lifts nearly five million Americans out of poverty every year. I led efforts to create the state version of this program as a state senator in Illinois, and I'll champion this program as president. My EITC proposal will ensure 5.8 million more Americans become eligible, and 6.2 million current EITC filers get larger benefits. When I'm president, I will make the minimum wage a living wage by indexing it to inflation so even more families have the economic stability they need.

To combat the health care crisis in America that disproportionately affects poor families and poor children, I will sign into law by the end of my first term in office a universal health care plan that mandates coverage of all American children and provides every American with an affordable, high-quality, portable health care option. My plan will save a typical American family up to \$2,500 every year on premiums, modernize the U.S. health care system to contain spiraling health care costs and

improve the quality of patient care, and promote prevention and strengthen public health.

Another important aspect of my antipoverty agenda is to help more Americans become successful entrepreneurs and small business owners. I will invest \$250 million per year to create a national network of public-private business incubators. These business incubators facilitate the critical work of entrepreneurs in creating start-up companies. They offer help designing business plans, providing space, identifying and addressing problems, and offering advice on a wide range of business practices. These incubators will engage the expertise and resources of local institutions, higher education, and successful private sector businesses to help ensure that small businesses have both a strong plan and the resources for long-term success. I will also ensure that more Small Business Administration (SBA) funds go to minority businesses, and that the SBA is doing its part to ensure that more venture capital funding flows to untapped communities. And I will take steps to close the digital divide and increase Internet access for cities in order to connect urban and rural America to the rest of America.

The final part of my plan will ensure that more Americans have access to safe, affordable housing. As president, I'll create an Affordable Housing Trust Fund that will add as many as 112,000 new affordable units in mixed income neighborhoods. In addition, I will roll back the Bush administration's repeated cuts to the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, which provides much needed housing assistance to our inner cities. I'll work to protect homeowners from mortgage fraud and subprime lending by passing my STOP FRAUD legislation to enact the first federal definition of mortgage fraud, strengthen penalties on fraudulent lenders, and mandate mortgage companies to provide accurate and comprehensive information about mortgage options, so that consumers know the true cost of the mortgage. I will also create a fund to help families refinance their mortgages and provide comprehensive supports, including credit counseling and tax assistance for innocent homeowners facing foreclosures.

What this agenda attempts to do is not easy, and it will not happen overnight. Changing the odds will require humility in what we can accomplish and patience with our progress. But most importantly, it will require the sustained commitment of the president of the United States to focus on what works.

There is an easy answer to the moral question of whether we can continue to tolerate poverty in America: We can't. The political question of what to do about it has always been more difficult. But now that we know what works, this country has an obligation to act. ☆