



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER



Community **Action**

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.

New study suggests that the wealth gap is still growing wider

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Social-inequality trends over the past half century indicate that class divisions are growing more rigid, most are getting worse off, and those at the bottom are falling further, faster by the day. It's the momentum of change that is causing much of the pain and anxiety, as many self-identified "middle-class Americans" are realizing the truth only now: They were never as well off as the thought they were.

– Michelle Chen

The quote above, penned by Michelle Chen, magazine editor and contributing writer to *The Nation* is without question painful to read, but not particularly surprising in this day and age. On more than one occasion I have utilized this space to explore the concept of the American Dream. Such columns have included the discussion of America's cavernous income and wealth gaps, a myriad of poverty-related problems, increasing economic insecurity, and mounting racial disparities, particularly in the State of Minnesota.

The disparities here have been so troubling, that in one column I specifically asked the question whether or not Dr. King's dream ever even "made its way to Minnesota." As racial inequity has continued to persist over the years, there have been a number of new projects established to address these negative tendencies.

Such efforts include legislative, government agency, nonprofit and other community-based initiatives designed to better understand and ultimately remedy Minnesota's rampant inequality. And, in just the past few weeks, the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis launched the Opportunity and Inclusive Growth Institute "to tackle racial and economic disparities" in our state, which ranks near the bottom of all 50 states in numerous categories that measure equality.

All of these endeavors should be encouraging, as is the release of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) which suggests improvements in some critical economic indicators. Yet, many scholars, activists, and media outlets have cautioned against such optimism. For example, in early January the financial news organization *24/7 Wall Street* ranked Minnesota as the "second worst state for Black Americans to live" for the third consecutive year. So the most logical question to my mind is, "When will we start to see some real progress?"

And in spite of some of the data from the most recent ACS, a new study published in the *Russell Sage Foundation Journal* insists that inequality in America "is only getting worse." As does Michelle Chen's article referenced above, Martin Levine, writing for the *Nonprofit Quarterly* recently highlighted this study conducted by Professors Fabian Pfeffer and Robert Schoeni of the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.

In addressing their research and assessing America's wealth gap, Pfeffer states that:

Overall, if you look back 30 years, most of the distribution [of wealth] is lower than where it was in the 1980s. So the typical American family today has less wealth than the typical American family in the 80s. But those higher on the economic hierarchy, affluent households, experienced the "mirror image," accruing riches and power at other's expense.

Pfeffer and Schoeni further suggest that these disparate trends and conditions are not likely to abate much in the near future.

Last week, I had the opportunity to deliver an address at the National Community Action Partnership Management and Leadership Training Conference in Long Beach, California. One of the principle tenets of my presentation was where we currently are as a society and the overriding fear that we are headed somewhere even worse. As the focus of my speech was to analyze the local conditions of the agency I lead, I primarily spoke to the racial inequities throughout the Twin Cities and greater Minnesota.

But when coupled with the new research out of the University of Michigan, it remains clear that our fears must not only spotlight those continuing to suffer from racial disparities – those whom the late Derrick Bell called "the faces at the bottom of the well" – but the majority of Americans who are becoming increasingly subject to economic insecurity and the ever present threat of poverty.

Today we find ourselves living in a nation where Dr. King's dream has never been fully realized, we are beginning to witness the emergent and catastrophic failure of the so-called American dream as well. As depressing as all of this may sound, we cannot afford to give up. We must remain steadfast in our quest to dismantle poverty and inequality regardless of how difficult the task.

I recently observed a conversation, where several individuals were debating whether or not it was ever possible to eliminate poverty in America, or beyond for that matter. While to some degree, I could appreciate all of the sentiments that were expressed; I was reminded of a passage from James Baldwin's 1963 book *The Fire Next Time*, where he writes:

I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least one can demand – and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general and American Negro history in particular, for it testified to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.

Whether or not we succeed, are we not obligated to try?

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