EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"THE PRESCRIPTION FOR THE CURE RESTS WITH AN ACCURATE DIAGNOSIS OF THE DISEASE."

REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., 1967
The Souls of Poor Folk is an assessment of the conditions today and trends of the past 50 years in the United States. In 1967 and 1968, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., alongside a multiracial coalition of grassroots leaders, religious leaders, and other public figures, began organizing with poor and marginalized communities across racial and geographic divides. Together, they aimed to confront the underlying structures that perpetuated misery in their midst. The move towards a Poor People’s Campaign was a challenge to the national morality: it was a movement to expose the injustice of the economic, political, and social systems in the U.S. during their time.

50 years later, The Souls of Poor Folk challenges us to take a look at how these conditions have changed since 1968. The stark findings draw from a wide variety of sources, including primary and secondary data as well as interviews with and testimonies by people who have been living through and responding to these changes on the ground. Their words offer deep insight for understanding these conditions and why these leaders feel compelled to call for a Poor People’s Campaign today.

The facts, figures, and faces in these pages counter numerous myths about what is wrong with our society, including two of the most prevalent:

1. Poverty is the fault of the poor

There is an enduring narrative that if these millions of people just acted better, worked harder, complained less, and prayed more, they would be lifted up and out of their miserable conditions. This report demonstrates that what Dr. King called the “Triplets of Evil”—systemic racism, poverty, and the war economy and militarism—as well as the interrelated problem of ecological devastation, have deepened since 1968 because of structural and systemic reasons, rather than individual failures.

2. Despite our nation’s abundance, there is not enough for all of us to survive and thrive

This report makes a clear case that the richest nation in the world has sufficient resources to protect the environment and ensure dignified lives for all its people. The problem is a matter of priorities, as more and more of our wealth flows into the pockets of a small but powerful few and into our bloated Pentagon budget.

The report also makes the case that the most pressing problems of our time cannot be tackled separately. It connects the attacks on voting rights to the attacks on basic needs like water, health care, living wages, and the shift towards the incarceration and criminalization of the poor, with disparate effects across race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. It shows that
our pursuit of wars not only costs countless lives abroad, but is also connected to domestic problems, including the gutting of public services, the decline in government accountability, and the poisoning of our water and air. It documents the decline of rural communities over the past 50 years, where hospitals are closing, jails are opening, and diseases that had been eradicated in the 20th century are cropping back up.

Moreover, The Souls of Poor Folk reminds us of the ongoing and emerging resistance and organizing that is compelling a change in our national priorities.

“In the economy of the 21st century, only a tiny percentage of the population is immune from the possibility that they could fall into poverty as a result of bad breaks beyond their own control. The American Dream is quickly becoming the American Illusion.”

Prof. Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights
KEY FINDINGS

Systemic Racism

- Legislative actions and legal decisions at the federal and state levels have severely restricted the ability of people of color, especially poor Black people, Latinx, and Native Americans, to participate in democratic processes. This includes the 2013 *Shelby v. Holder* Supreme Court case, which gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Further, 23 states have adopted some form of voter suppression law since 2010, and 25 states have pre-empted cities from passing minimum wage laws (many in response to successful grassroots living wage campaigns). In Michigan, emergency financial management laws have paved the way for state-appointed and unaccountable managers to sideline democratically elected local officials. Flint was under emergency management when city officials made decisions that poisoned the city’s water supply.

- “Tough on crime” politics has led to increased policing of poor communities and a tenfold increase in annual federal discretionary spending on prisons since 1976. The number of sentenced inmates of all races in U.S. state and federal prison grew from 187,914 in 1968 to 1,458,000 in 2016. People of color account for 66 percent of people in prison, while they make up only about 39 percent of the total population. And the number of citizens disenfranchised due to felony convictions has tripled, from 2 million in 1968 to 6.1 million in 2016, including one in thirteen Black adults.

- Federal spending on immigration, deportation, and border policies increased from $2 billion to $17 billion and deportations increased tenfold between 1976 and 2015. These anti-immigrant measures affect not only deportees and detainees, but also their communities and family members, who face greater difficulty in affording basic expenses, meeting rent, and paying for utilities.

Poverty

- Restrictions on democratic participation are compounded by structural changes in employment towards a low-wage economy, tied to a decline in union membership. At the time of the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign, productivity and
wages had been rising in tandem for at least two decades. But beginning in the 1970s, employers no longer shared the benefits of improved productivity with their workers. Between 1973 and 2016, hourly compensation increased just 12.3 percent, while productivity increased 73.7 percent. This has been accompanied by anti-union policies like “right to work” laws that have undermined workers’ power to bargain collectively. Between 1968 and 2017, the share of U.S. workers in unions fell from 24.9 percent to 10.7 percent.

- **Instead of going to workers, massive gains from economic growth have been going to a smaller and smaller share of society.** Since 1968, the top 1 percent’s share of national income has nearly doubled while the official poverty rate for all U.S. families has merely inched up and down. The 400 wealthiest Americans now own more wealth than the bottom 64 percent of the U.S. population (or 204 million people).

- **Nearly 41 million Americans live below the federal poverty line.** In absolute terms, White people made up 42.5 percent of this population (17.3 million), and the next two largest groups are Latinx (11.1 million) at 27.4 percent, and Black Americans (9.2 million) at 22.7 percent. In relative terms, Native Americans and Alaska Natives have the highest poverty rate of any racial group, at 26.2 percent. Black people have the second-highest poverty rate, at 22 percent. This is followed by Latinx people (19.4 percent), White people (11 percent), and Asian Americans (10.1 percent).

- **Nearly 140 million people (43.5 percent) are either poor or low-income** under the alternative Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which goes beyond income to consider out-of-pocket expenses for food, clothing, housing and utilities, geographic disparities, and federal assistance. “Low income” in this context means a household making less than twice the poverty line.

- **Almost four in ten children spend at least one year of their lives in poverty, meaning that there has been a rise, also, in the number of poor families.** In 2016, households led by single mothers comprised almost 30 percent of families with incomes below the poverty line. Households led by Native women had the highest poverty rates (42.6 percent), followed by those headed by immigrant women (almost 42 percent), Latinx women (40.8 percent), Black women (38.8 percent) and White women (30.2 percent). LGBTQ people are disproportionately represented among the poor as well.

- **The scaling back of anti-poverty programs has contributed to the perception that government programs do not work.** By far the greatest reduction in federal spending for low-income families came with the passage of Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, which eliminated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF drastically reduced resources available to families in poverty and imposed unrealistic work requirements. The AFDC program assisted 68 percent of poor families with children in 1996. Today, TANF assists only 23 percent of poor families with children. In all but 3 states, TANF benefits have declined since 1996, with monthly benefits in all 50 states equal to or below two-thirds of the federal poverty line. These changes in welfare were part of the overall shift towards a low-wage economy.

- **Housing, higher education, and health care costs have increased significantly.** Over the past 30 years, rents have gone up faster than income in nearly every urban area in the country. In
2016, there was no state or county in the nation where an individual earning the federal minimum wage of $7.25 an hour could afford a two-bedroom apartment at market rent. As of 2017, for every 100 extremely low-income renters, a mere 35 will find affordable housing.

- **Cuts in federal housing assistance and affordable, subsidized housing since the 1970s have contributed to rising structural homelessness.** A government survey of people who were homeless in 2017 found that 41 percent were Black, 47 percent were White, and 22 percent were Latinx. A majority of homeless families are headed by single women with young children. The problem is particularly acute for LGBTQ youth, who represent between five and ten percent of the nation’s young people, but between 20 and 40 percent of the homeless youth population. A [2015 survey](#) found that a much larger number of people, estimated at 2.5 million to 3.5 million, sleep in shelters or encampments at some point every year, while another estimated 7.4 million are on the brink of homelessness, having lost their own homes and transitioned into the homes of others.

- **Student debt levels have exploded, driven in part by the growth of high-cost, high-risk, for-profit colleges, which now make up nearly a third of new higher education opportunities.** Among for-profit college students, 64 percent are women, 52 percent are people of color, 50 percent have dependent children, and 51 percent work full-time while enrolled. Student debt now amounts to $1.34 trillion and affects about 44 million Americans.

- **Even under the Affordable Care Act, about 31 million people remain uninsured, including 4.6 million Black people, 10.2 million Latinx and 13.6 million Whites.** This is despite the fact that the U.S. spends more per capita on health care than any other country, at approximately $10,348 per person per year. In 2016, 43 percent of adults with health insurance struggled to pay their deductibles, nearly 30 percent had a hard time affording medical bills and 73 percent cut back on basic household needs and food to pay their medical bills. Medical debt is the number one cause of personal bankruptcy filings, with an estimated 40 percent of Americans taking on debt because of medical issues.

- **America has become a debtor nation.** Excluding the value of the family car, 19 percent of all U.S. households (60 million people), 30 percent of Black households, 27 percent of Latinx households, and 14 percent of White households have zero wealth or their debts exceeded the value of their assets.

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**The War Economy and Militarism**

- **Since Vietnam, the United States has waged an ongoing war against diffuse enemies,**
siphoning massive resources away from social needs. The current annual military budget, at $668 billion, dwarfs the $190 billion allocated for education, jobs, housing, and other basic services and infrastructure. Out of every dollar in federal discretionary spending, 53 cents goes towards the military, with just 15 cents on anti-poverty programs.

- **Washington's wars of the last 50 years have had little to do with protecting Americans, while the profit motive has increased significantly.** With private contractors now performing many traditional military roles, there have been almost 10 times as many military contractors per soldier in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars as there were during the Vietnam War, many of them making far more money than underpaid U.S. soldiers. Army privates in combat earned less than $30,000 in 2016. At the top end of the pay scale, the disparities are even more extreme. In 2016, the CEOs of the top five military contractors earned on average $19.2 million—more than 90 times the $214,000 earned by a U.S. military general with 20 years of experience, including housing allowances and extra combat pay and approximately 640 times the amount earned by Army privates in combat.

- **U.S. military interventions have caused staggering numbers of civilian deaths in poor countries.** According to the United Nations, almost one-third more civilians died in Afghanistan during the first nine months of 2017 than during that same period in 2009 when the counting began. Compared to the same period in 2016, there was a 52 percent increase of civilian deaths from airstrikes in 2017, with women and children comprising 68 percent of these deaths.

- **Perpetual war has also taken a toll on U.S. troops and personnel.** In 2012, suicide claimed more military deaths than military action. A follow-up study found that in 2014, the risk of suicide was 22 percent higher among veterans than among U.S. civilian adults. By September 2017, an average of 20 veterans were still dying by suicide each day. Among women in the military, sexual harassment is rampant. A 2012 Department of Veterans Affairs survey indicated that nearly half of female military personnel sent to Iraq or Afghanistan had reported being sexually harassed, and nearly 25 percent said they had been sexually assaulted.

- **Militarism abroad has gone hand in hand with the militarization of U.S. borders and of poor communities across this country.** Local police are now equipped with war machinery such as the armored military vehicle deployed in Ferguson, Missouri, in response to protests over the police killing of a Black teenager, Michael Brown, in 2014. Young Black males have been
hardest hit by this escalation in force. They are nine times more likely to be killed by police officers than other Americans, while rates of police killings for Native American and Latinx men are also disproportionately high and poor youth of all races have suffered.

- The perpetual war economy is also linked to the broader trend of criminalization of the poor over the past 50 years. Policies that criminalize the very condition of being poor have continued to expand since the 2008 financial crisis. By the Department of Justice’s own admission, ninety-five percent of the growth in the incarcerated population since 2000 is the result of an increase in the number of defendants unable to make bail. This is also the result of the fact that bail amounts themselves have increased over the years.

Ecological Devastation

- The U.S. and global climate and ecological crises are multipliers of the other injustices documented in this report. Fossil fuel, chemical, and other industries have been allowed to poison our air, water, and land, contributing to an estimated 9 million premature deaths (16 percent of all deaths) worldwide in 2015—three times more deaths than from AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria combined and 15 times more than from all wars and other forms of violence. The environmental death toll is expected to rise exponentially as a result of climate change. And the poor, particularly poor people of color, face the worst impacts.

- The tragic effects of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Rico in 2017 are a disturbing example of rising climate change threats, particularly for the poor. Catastrophic events like hurricanes and flooding are partly attributable to climate change and are expected to become more frequent. When Maria hit Puerto Rico, where the poverty rate was already 43.5 percent, almost the entire island lost access to electricity. Two months later, more than half of the island’s residents still lacked power and about nine percent lacked water. The delay was partly due to the poor state of the island’s infrastructure, which had been allowed to deteriorate as the U.S. Congress pressured the island to prioritize debt payments to Wall Street. A New York Times analysis indicates as many as 1,025 people may have died as a result of the hurricane.

- Across the United States, poor people face crises of water affordability, water pollution, and water scarcity in some areas exacerbated by climate change. As a percentage of income, poor households spend seven times as much on water bills as wealthy households. The United Nations recommends that, in order to remain affordable, water rates do not exceed 3 percent of household income. Yet, there are 13.8 million low-income households that already spend more
than 4.5 percent of their income on water, and some communities are facing water shut-off rates of 20 percent or more. Federal assistance to local water systems is now 74 percent below its peak in 1977, adjusted for inflation, even as pipes are aging and infrastructure investment needs are rising.

- **While poor urban populations deal with rising water bills, the rural poor often lack access to piped water and sewage systems, with striking racial disparities.** According to a [2016 study](#), an estimated 540,000 households (1.4 million to 1.7 million people) reported a lack of access to complete plumbing facilities. Of the 20 counties with the highest percentage of households lacking access to complete plumbing, all were rural and 13 had a majority Native American or Alaskan Native population.

- **Meanwhile, pipeline infrastructure to transport oil and gas has been expanding, even though it poses serious threats to the climate, water quality, and public health through leakage as well as catastrophic spills.** The proximity of pipelines to freshwater sources is particularly dangerous, since leaks of pollutants into water can spread large distances and affect drinking water sources for downstream communities. Between 1998 and 2017, there have been 5,712 significant oil and gas leaks or ruptures on U.S. pipelines. Between 1964 and 2015, there were 2,441 spills from offshore oil drilling operations in U.S. territorial waters, discharging almost 5.2 million barrels (218 million gallons) of oil. The largest of these was the 4.9 million barrel Deepwater Horizon “BP” oil spill off the coast of Louisiana in 2010.

- **The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) was responsible for emitting 72 percent of the U.S. government’s total greenhouse gas emissions in 2016.** The DoD’s overseas emissions, which are produced during the most destructive operations of the U.S. military, accounted for 56 percent of the U.S. Government’s total greenhouse emissions; however, these overseas emissions are exempt from the U.S. Government’s emissions reduction goals.

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As Rev. Dr. King said in 1967, “we must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together...you can’t really get rid of one without getting rid of the other.” Today these evils, along with ecological devastation, have become more and more tightly bound together. They are part of a larger system that has concentrated economic and political power into fewer and fewer hands, driving a deepening and dangerous inequality that is impacting the majority of people in this country.

This means we must break through the notion that systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, militarism and ecological devastation only hurt a small segment of our society.
There are 140 million people struggling every day, and even more are saddled with debt or otherwise unable to make ends meet. Meanwhile, a small minority has amassed unheard-of wealth and power. In 2017, just three White men owned as much wealth as the bottom half of the U.S. population or 160 million people. And of the top 400 wealthiest people in the U.S., there are just two Black individuals and five with Latinx backgrounds. This predominantly White super wealthy class, however, does not represent the conditions facing the majority of White people in the country, even though they are used to prop up and maintain systemic racism and systems of white supremacy that keep people poor, in debt and in jail.

This report shows what has happened as the government increasingly caters to the interests of those few rich and powerful rather than being accountable to the poor and marginalized majority. In response, it is necessary to bring together all those who are impacted to build their own power.

This kind of power is emerging through the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. The Poor People’s Campaign is a moral fusion coalition that is multi-racial, multi-gendered, intergenerational, inter-faith and constitutionally grounded and has been growing in more than 25 states around the country. It is seeking to build a unity across race, issue, gender, gender identity, sexual identity, age, faith and geography that can break through the politics that divide us.

The Souls of Poor Folk is providing an empirical basis to build and strengthen that unity. It also is only a beginning. It does not, and cannot, address the full range of issues under each theme. For this reason, we hope that it encourages more research, debate, and analysis, so that we may, together, identify the solutions we so desperately need.

“Throughout America’s history— from abolition, to women’s suffrage, to labor and civil rights— real social change has come when impacted people have joined hands with allies of good will to stand together against injustice. These movements did not simply stand against partisan foes. They stood for the deep moral center of our Constitutional and faith traditions. Those deep wells sustained poor and impacted people who knew in their bones both that power concedes nothing without a fight and that, in the end, love is the greatest power to sustain a fight for what is right.”

Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, Co-Chair of the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival