



NESRI

NATIONAL ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL RIGHTS INITIATIVE

Human Rights | Human Needs



Ensure That Everyone's Needs Are Met: The Importance of Universal Policies That Include All

Guided by the human rights principles of universality, equity, and the protection of public goods, NESRI along with seven collaborators and 40 endorsers submitted a report to the United Nations on economic and social rights in the United States. Our report calls on the U.S. government to implement universal policies to ensure that everyone's needs are met, instead of forcing individuals to compete against each other in a marketplace that imposes artificial scarcity on essential goods and services. This also requires revoking divisive market-based incentives when they stigmatize, displace, exclude, or criminalize people. We summarize our analysis below.

The Human Right to Education: end school pushout and provide positive learning environments for all. The United States has betrayed the public education promise of a quality education for all, and instead incentivized the creation of a separate and unequal education system divided along racial and class lines. More than half of African American male students and more than one third of Latino males do not complete high school on time, exemplifying severe educational disparities. Competition for grants incentivizes schools to attribute poor academic performance to individual students and push them out whenever possible. Around 1.3 million children drop out of school each year, more than 3.3 million are suspended and 102,000 expelled. This pushout crisis arises directly from schools' failure to meet children's needs, yet the responsibility is shifted to the individual students. A negative selection process lies at the heart of an education system based on competition instead of the full development of all children. No strategy is in place to ensure that all children receive an education when pushout or school closures leave students without access to an adequate school. On the contrary, many children end up in the juvenile or criminal justice system instead, propelled by a 'school-to-prison pipeline' that results in a three times higher incarceration rate of males who drop out of school compared to those who graduate.

The Human Right to Health Care: provide a universal public insurance plan that entitles everyone to equal high quality health care. The United States is the only high-income country without a universal health care system, even after recent reform efforts. 101,000 people are estimated to die each year because of the way the health system is organized, and 45,000 deaths per year are attributed to the lack of health insurance. Yet having insurance coverage does not guarantee access to care: at least 25 million people are underinsured and likely to forgo care due to deductibles and co-pays. The United States also has fewer doctors and nurses than many other high-income countries, and a less developed primary care infrastructure. Despite the highest health care spending in the world, health outcomes in the United States are comparatively poor. While other countries have highly redistributive systems, funded collectively through cross-subsidization with a common pool that includes all, the United States offers only residual public programs for certain groups. Even after the 2010 health reform law, the exclusion of at least 23 million people from access to coverage is projected to continue. The system will remain highly stratified with separate tiers for different categories of people receiving different levels of care. The level and quality of care a person gets will continue to depend on how they access the system, rather than on their health needs.

The Human Right to Housing: provide adequate and affordable housing for all who need it. U.S. policies fail to provide safe and decent housing for everyone, and homelessness has become a structural feature of society. There is no national strategy to address the severe lack of affordable housing, which particularly affects people of color. Over a third of all U.S. households face serious affordability constraints, even prior to the current crisis of foreclosures and displacements. While the government dedicates significant resources to supporting homeownership and private development, these investments have hampered rather than furthered the human rights obligation of meeting the housing needs of all. Preferential treatment is given to the acquisition of private property by individuals and businesses who can afford it, rather than supporting housing as a public good, based on a common need shared by everyone. Housing is traded in a highly stratified marketplace, with public subsidies for owners over renters, for the housed over the homeless, and for property taxpayers over recipients of housing assistance.

The Human Right to Work with Dignity: guarantee a living wage, with dignified working conditions for all. The United States largely leaves market forces to dictate wages and workplace conditions and lacks a national strategy for full, secure, and regulated employment. A growing trend of increasingly informal and temporary work without benefits, obtained through temp agencies or contracting agreements, has reduced the availability of stable, well-paid work. Long labor supply chains free employers of any responsibility for the workers at the end of the chains. Corporations increasingly treat their workforce as an expendable commodity. Since the 1980s government policies have refused to pursue full employment as a social goal, and have failed to guarantee a living wage to all workers. For the last 30 years, wages have stagnated for the lower half of wage earners, while the top 1% of earners enjoyed a net income gain of 176%. Women on average still earn less than men, and people of color earn less than Whites. The minimum wage has fallen to about 35% of average wages, and a quarter of all jobs do not pay enough to lift a family of four out of poverty. The government also fails to provide and enforce legal protections for many basic rights at work, which has encouraged extreme cases of abuse, including forced labor and slavery, which are symptomatic of, yet hidden in, a sea of workplace violations.

The Human Right to Social Security: provide an automatic universal basic income for everyone. The United States has far greater income inequality than other high-income countries, and the second-lowest rate among OECD countries for reducing inequality through public cash transfers. The official poverty rate in 2009 was 14.3% (43.6 million people), with African Americans and women disproportionately affected. Around 30% of the population lacks an adequate income to meet their needs, and around 58 million people face either food or energy insecurity, or both. Since the legal right to welfare was ended in 1996, the number of recipients has decreased by a third to around 2 million, and enrollment in this and other benefits programs is actively discouraged. The lack of adequate social protection keeps wages low for the majority of the population, which in turn increases the need for income support. Selective benefits policies segregate the poor into special groups defined by eligibility criteria and a demeaning application process, thereby drawing a line of demarcation between people whose taxes pay for social benefits and those who receive them. This stigmatizes and marginalizes poor people, and violates their dignity and liberty, as do compulsory work requirements imposed as a condition of welfare and housing benefits, along with the arbitrary withdrawal of benefits to punish disapproved behavior.

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Access the full report online: www.nesri.org/UPRReportOnEconomic&SocialRights.pdf