

Faithful Citizenship

Principles and Strategies to Serve the Common Good

Edited by Dennis Hamm, S.J., and Gail S. Risch

There Is Hope for Diminishing Poverty and Inequities in America

Response to Massingale

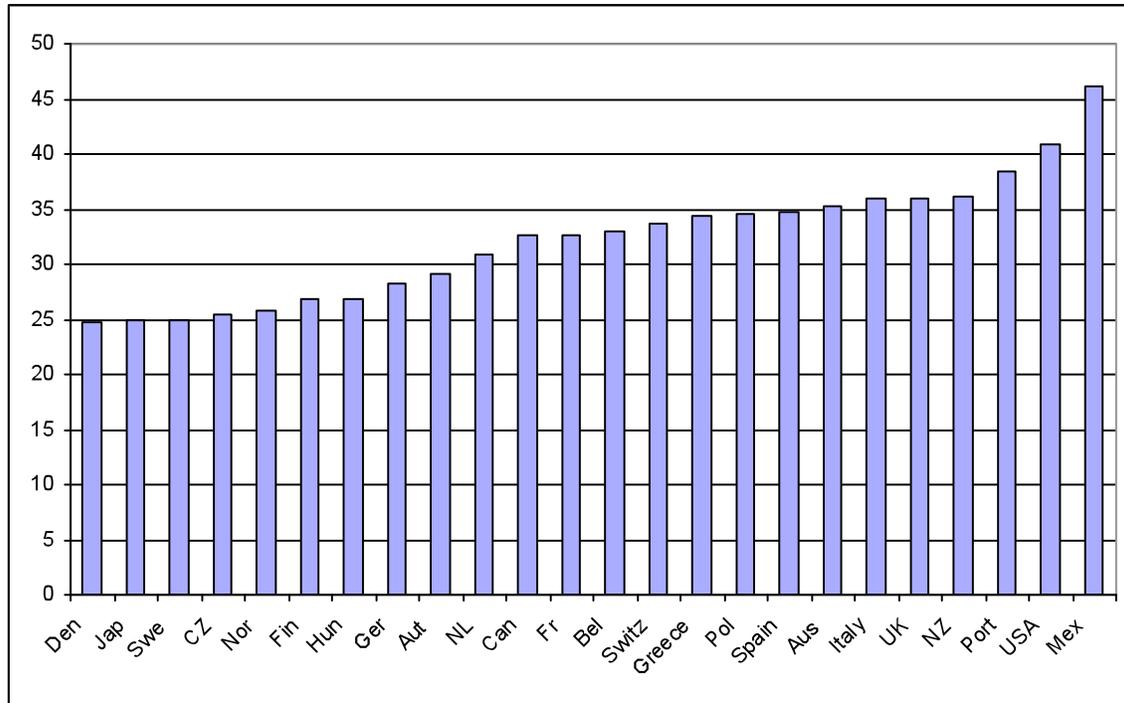
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[1] Father Massingale paints a dark picture, one of cultured indifference to the tribulations of the poor, the roots of poverty – racism (largely unconscious), an ideology of personal responsibility that expects everyone to be self-sufficient in and of themselves, and a culture of consumerism in which value and dignity are conferred based on what one has or has the ability to get.

[2] I would add a two more contributors to the neglect of the poor: 1) inadequate perception of social inequities and injustice, and 2) discomfort that even compassionate human beings experience when confronting suffering, particularly if they have no notion of how to alleviate it or to change the circumstances causing suffering.

[3] We know the difficulty of maintaining close relationships with the seriously ill and dying, who frequently feel abandoned, even by friends and relatives, sometimes by health professionals who deal with death and dying as part of their professional responsibility. If it is difficult to confront the suffering of one person, how does one confront and effectively

Figure 1. Gini Indices of 24 Nations: Inequality in Income or Expenditure



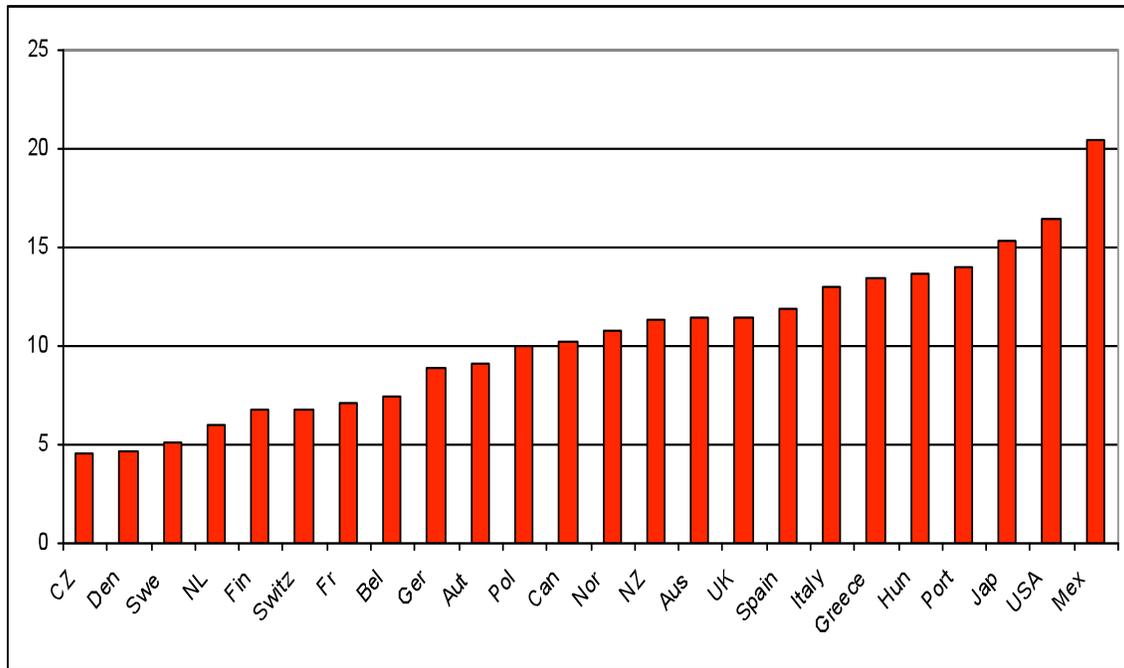
Based on Table 15, United Nations Human Development Report 2007/2008: 281-84.

address the poverty of millions? One may feel compassion, but what can one person do? How can an individual change or affect the lives of many, especially when one doesn't know them, does not share many of their values, and at times is frightened of them?

[4] Father Massingale proposes a “radical conversion of the spirit to embrace the ‘option for the poor.’” I do not dispute the need for such conversion, but many have already embraced the “option for the poor.” I see evidence all around me of compassion towards the underprivileged and the suffering. Creighton students, faculty and staff are committed to and engaged in activities that reveal strong commitment to the “option for the poor.” For example, the Creighton community is involved with Habitat for Humanity, the Magis Clinic, the Creighton Legal Clinic, Upward Bound, Adopt a School programs, and others, enough to fill many pages enumerating them.

[5] Beyond the Creighton community, there are many local, well-intended, and successful efforts to assist the underprivileged, the poor, and the oppressed: Siena-Francis House; organizations serving Latinos/Hispanics, African Americans, American Indians, and the Sudanese and the Somali refugee communities; Building Bright Futures; and numerous organizations dedicated to improving opportunities for poor children and their parents. Commitments to the poor are not new; recall the Creighton sisters distributing money, food and clothing to the poor more than 100 years ago; the pioneering civil rights efforts of Fr. John Markoe 60 years ago; the establishment in 1968 of the American Indian Health Center

Figure 2. Relative Rates of Poverty of 24 Nations (% in Poverty)



Based on Förster and d’Ercole: 21.

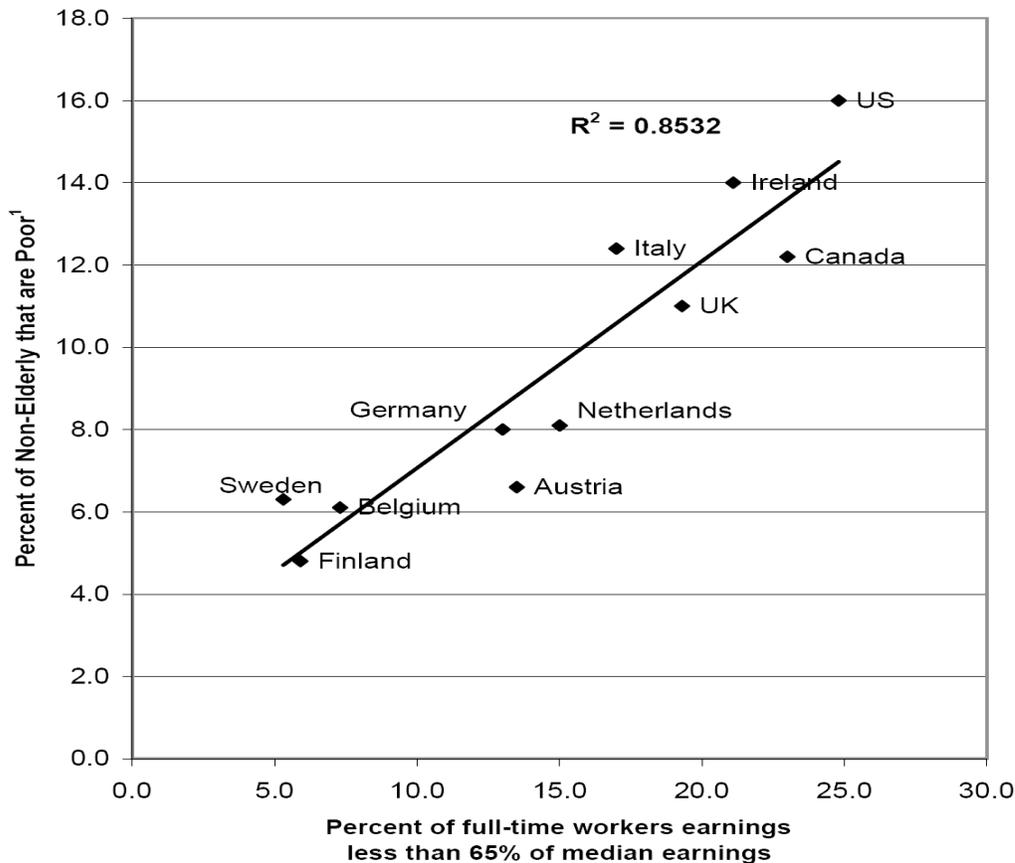
by a Lutheran minister and Creighton Dental students and faculty members, and dozens of other community based programs and organizations that have existed for decades.

[6] Many have adopted the “option for the poor” as an important or prime motivator and live it day-to-day. Of course, there are many who do not, many who disdain the poor and blame them for their condition. We should pray for their conversion. But if so many people of good will have made a commitment to the poor, why do we still have such enormous problems, such disparities of health and wealth, so much poverty, oppression and hopelessness? Is it because our well-intentioned efforts are ineffective? In some instances that may be so, but I do not believe it is the case with most.

[7] Many efforts set explicit goals enabling people to escape poverty, lead fuller and richer lives, and have opportunities that poverty and/or racial, ethnic and cultural stereotyping may deny them. There is much anecdotal and systematic information documenting the salutary effects of programs to help the poor. Many who have emerged from poverty attribute their success to programs that have reached out to them, and some have subsequently dedicated themselves to helping others escape conditions similar to those from which they have escaped. Some have even initiated new programs of their own.

[8] If there are effective means to help people escape poverty, why is poverty not only prevalent but increasing? Is the problem so intransigent that it is hopeless to believe we can actually reduce the rate of poverty in our country? Do not believe it. In fact, disbelieve it! The rate of poverty in the United States declined substantially, essentially by half, from 1960-

Figure 3. Low Wages and Non-elderly Poverty Rates (circa 2000)



Source: Smeeding: 86.

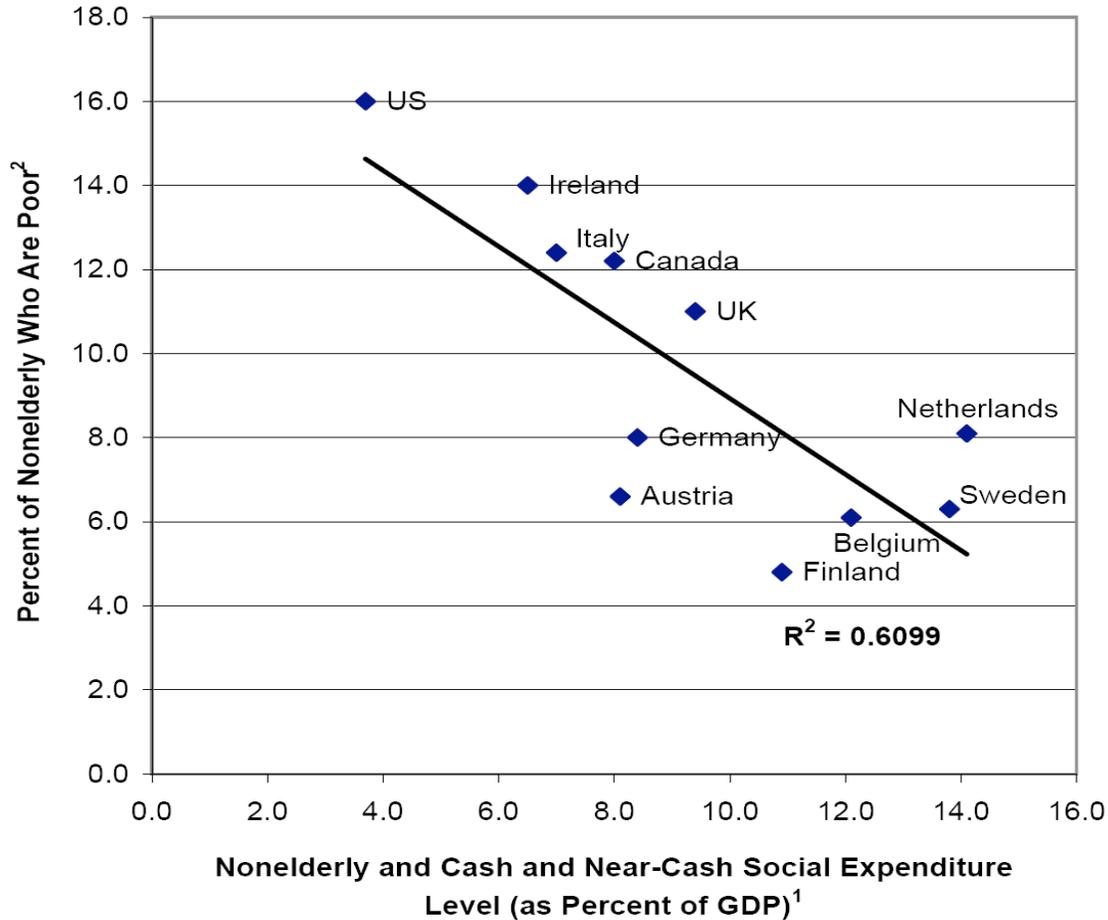
¹Percentage of persons below 65 in poor households.

1972. It then increased from 1980 to the early 1990s, and again declined until 2000. Since 2000 poverty has again been on the increase (Greenberg). Nevertheless, the success of poverty reduction from 1960 to 1972 and again from 1993 to 2000 gives us reason to believe, to hope, that we can reduce the “scandal of poverty.”

[9] Reducing poverty will require collective action. I suggest that we modify Father Massingale’s conclusion that we seek a “radical conversion of the collective spirit,” to a conversion of the collective political will.

[10] Is that a hopeless aspiration? I do not think so. The declines in poverty we saw in the 1960s and 70s can be attributed to President Johnson’s “war on poverty,” a much maligned but clearly successful effort, and the civil rights movement. Furthermore, we can learn much from other nations that have developed sufficient solidarity, collective spirit or will, and have adopted policies and programs that effectively address poverty. None have abolished poverty, but many have done much better than the United States.

Figure 4. Social Expenditures and Non-elderly Poverty Rates (circa 2000)



Source: Smeeding: 83.

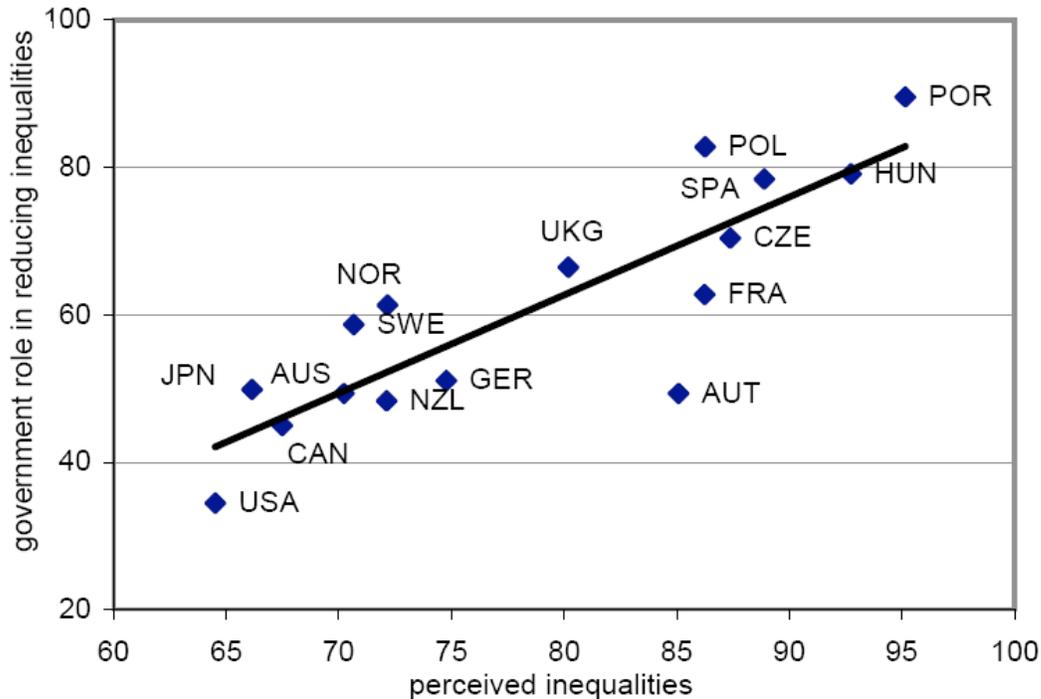
¹Cash and non-cash social expenditures exclude health, education, and social services, but include all forms of cash benefits and near cash housing subsidies, active labor market program subsidies and other contingent cash and other near cash benefits. Nonelderly benefits include only those accruing to household heads under age 65.

²Percentage of persons below 65 in poor households.

[11] We know that poverty in a wealthy nation exists only if there are great disparities of wealth distribution. Examining Gini (income/wealth inequality) Indices of 24 nations reveals that the United States is second only to Mexico in Inequality (Figure 1). Similarly, the United States is second only to Mexico in percentage of population living in poverty (Figure 2).

[12] Economic inequity also results from disparities of wages. Father Massingale refers to low paying jobs. Compared to 11 other wealthy nations, the U.S. leads in both rates of poverty and low wages (Figure 3). Further, social spending correlates negatively with poverty rates; the more a nation allocates to social spending (including family support allocations,

Figure 5. Perceived inequalities and views about government's role in reducing them



Source: Förster and d'Ercole: 12.

housing, job training, food assistance, earned income tax credits), the lower the poverty rate (Figure 4). As represented in this figure, social spending does not include health spending, old age pensions or education.

[13] Other nations have found ways to diminish poverty. In fact, the U.S. did so from 1960-1972 and 1993-2000. It is a matter of political will. What can be done to effect the “radical conversion” that Massingale calls for, a conversion that will diminish health disparities and lead to a more appropriate level of social spending in the U.S.?

[14] First, we need to increase public awareness of the problem because public awareness matters. The reality of inequality and the perception of inequality are inversely correlated. The United States ranks second from the bottom of sixteen economically advanced nations in its perception of inequality, but the actual inequality of the United States is second among these nations. The misperception of inequality correlates positively with public expectations of the role of government in reducing inequities. The lower the perception of inequality, the lower public expectation that government has a role in reducing it. (Figure 5).

[15] Will greater public recognition of inequities bring about a collective conversion of spirit, of political will? It is reasonable to hope so. I am convinced most people are (or can be) motivated by compassion. If they are aware of social inequities, the suffering related to inequity, and what can successfully diminish them, people will demand that political leaders

take appropriate steps and new political leaders may emerge who will propose and introduce measures to reduce poverty.

[16] There is hope that expanding consciousness of poverty and its toll on society may stir Americans to action. Many believe that Michael Harrington's book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, inspired President Johnson's war on poverty in the 1960s. There is growing media attention to societal inequities, for example the PBS series on health care and poverty, comparisons of the U.S. with other wealthy countries, and print media attention to poverty, its extent and its societal costs may be taken as a hopeful sign of increasing public awareness. Will better knowledge of poverty and its effects appeal to public compassion and inspire enlightened politicians? Let us hope so. We must sustain ongoing private efforts to alleviate poverty and press for greater public action by our state and national governments.

[17] We must be aware and beware of those, who out of ignorance or malevolence, attempt to appeal to our fear of the different or our fear of loss. Some, politicians and others, are sure to do so. Hope is our beacon and justice is our goal.

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