

*spotlight on*  
**POVERTY and OPPORTUNITY**  
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**Poverty at Home and Abroad**

Nicholas Kristof, New York Times

*Nicholas Kristof has spent his career as a journalist and columnist covering human rights and global affairs around the world. But he's also been active in highlighting domestic poverty as well. Spotlight recently spoke with him about his observations on poverty at home and abroad, interventions that could be implemented here in the US, and the state of poverty coverage in the media. This conversation has been lightly edited for length and clarity.*

**You had a recent column on the remarkable reduction in global poverty. Can you talk a little about this and whether or not you see similar cause for optimism domestically?**

There is definitely good news when it comes to international poverty. The public thinks globally we are stuck in cycles of endless poverty, but in fact we have made tremendous progress. The number of people who are considered extremely poor (meaning less than \$1.90 per day) has dropped in half over the last twenty years. Less than ten percent of the world's population are living in extreme poverty and by 2030 it's reasonable to think that extreme poverty will be virtually eradicated (meaning under 3 percent).

Child mortality has seen a similar drop as over the same time period. That translates to six million lives saved per year.

I'm a big believer in the importance of education as well. Up until the 1960s the majority of human adults were illiterate. Now the global literacy rate is around 85%. That has far reaching implications for income and social capital.

**And what about domestically?**

Domestically it's not so encouraging. Globally inequality has dropped while over the last few decades it has increased domestically.

While we've seen some improvement in the last couple of years in the number of kids living in poverty, we're still well above where we were in 2000.

**What are your thoughts on the recent poverty figures released by the Census Bureau?**

Overall, it was very encouraging. There was a significant drop in the poverty rate, but it would be nice to see that sustained over time.

We have proven tools for fighting poverty in a way that we didn't 25 years ago. We now have a much more robust idea of what works and what doesn't. So it's really a matter of investing in these tools.

**Can you give an example?**

The teen birth rate has dropped by more than half since 1991. That's a huge behavioral change. But despite the tremendous progress on this front, we still have teen birth rates about three times of Europe.

When a 15 year-old girl has a child the predicted outcomes aren't good for her or her baby. Research shows that long-acting reversible birth control and comprehensive sex education could reduce unplanned pregnancy and poverty much further. We just need the political will.

**Do you see any areas in this space that are potentially ripe for bipartisan action?**

There are a couple of areas, in large part because there is increasingly rigorous evidence of what works.

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One of the reasons we haven't been more effective in fighting poverty is that many of our programs start too late in late. Interventions at age one work better than those at eight or eighteen.

In some ways, early childhood programs are natural territory for Democrats. But Republicans have recognized these interventions as well and Paul Ryan has spoken enthusiastically about home visitation programs like Nurse-Family Partnership.

If you look at this presidential race, this is also the first time I know of that all four presidential and vice presidential nominees have endorsed broader early childhood programs.

I think it also helps that red states have been real pioneers in this area as well. For instance, Oklahoma has instituted universal Pre-K and other early childhood programs. They aren't doing it because it is a social justice issue, they are doing it because they will save money by investing at the front end.

So there is bipartisan interest. I wonder if Democrats talk too much about inequality – which is a liberal word – and not enough about opportunity. I think opportunity is more of a bridge building concept.

**Are there lessons to draw from international anti-poverty efforts that you have observed?**

Broadly speaking, implementing programs in a meticulous and robust way is crucial for seeing what works.

For example, there was an innovative conditional cash transfer [program](#) in Mexico that essentially bribed low-income families to invest in their children's education and healthcare. It was also revolutionary in that it was introduced in a randomized way. It turned out to work incredibly well and they could prove it. There is a lesson there about effectively measuring what works.

Another thing we've seen internationally is the importance of bringing people into the banking system. Globally, there is a huge population of adults who are underbanked and that is true in the US as well. It's a huge challenge if you don't have access to savings mechanisms and are having to turn to services like payday loans.

Microsavings programs have shown to be extremely successful at helping women build wealth and connect with banking services. Although for unknown reasons, we haven't seen the same results with men.

**Switching gears slightly, what do you make of the rise of Donald Trump? Are there lessons here that relate to poverty and opportunity?**

There are an awful lot of white working-class Americans that feel like they have been left behind by the economy and they blame this on trade, immigration, and – to some extent – racial minorities. I think whoever is elected needs to worry about these broader inequality and opportunity issues.

I'm struck that in the early 1960s we saw these remarkable political gains for African Americans. What was it about that environment that allowed that legislation to be passed? I wonder if a factor was that for decades the economy had been growing in an inclusive way. So if you were a white working-class male you were perhaps more willing to make space for African Americans, whereas now they feel as if they were worse off than they were a generation ago. I think that this may make people more willing to turn against people who don't look like them.

The nastiness these days towards racial and ethnic minorities is a reminder that creating equality and broad-inclusive growth is not just an economic issue but is also crucial to creating a society that is more tolerant.

**How good a job do you think the media is doing in covering poverty?**

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I think we do a lousy job both domestically and internationally. In large part, that is a reflection of audience interest. At end of the day, journalism is struggling with an eroding business model. And the truth is if you send a camera crew out to do a piece on homelessness, your audience will drop compared to the rival channel that does some piece about a cat stuck in a tree. I see this firsthand, when I write about these issues my audience drops.

**Is there a solution to these challenges? Do we need more nonprofit journalism?**

Foundation support may be one part of the solution. I also think those of us who carry about these issues need to do a better job telling these stories. Finding compelling examples and communicate them effectively.

*Nicholas Kristof is a columnist with the New York Times.*

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