



Middle Class Prosperity Project
The Effects of Poverty on Children's Opportunities
Thursday, December 3

Opening Remarks
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Good Afternoon. It is an honor to be here to participate in the Middle Class Prosperity Project. Thank you Senator Warren and Congressman Cummings, and to all the staff and panelists who make this important forum possible.

My name is Sister Simone Campbell and I am the executive director of NETWORK, a National Catholic Social Justice Lobby, and the leader of the "Nuns on the Bus".

This fall, we organized a two-week bus trip in advance of Pope Francis's visit to the U.S. On this trip, as on previous trips, we came to know in our hearts that families in our nation are struggling and children often pay the price of that struggle. I want to tell you a few stories from the road – stories of heartbreak and hope.

I met Anika in Nashville. At the age of five, she was molested and raped. She was placed in foster care, but ran away and was homeless at the age of fifteen. By the time she was out of her teens she had children and began doing drugs. She lost her kids to the foster care system that had failed her, and was incarcerated over eighty times. Anika is an ex-felon but thanks to Magdalen House in Nashville, she has found another way. She has completed their program and is now working full-time at their business, Thistle Farms. In the process of recovery she was reunited with her children and is building a home with them. With the financial assistance of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit, she was able to save up a down payment and buy a house. She is the first home owner ever in her family. The EITC and Child Tax Credit are making a difference in her life and in the lives of so many of our people.

Before our bus trip, I was in Madison, Wisconsin and I visited the Salvation Army family homeless shelter. There I met families who were employed but still homeless. They told me that they weren't making enough money to afford housing in the tight Madison market. Additionally, many of them could not work longer hours because the only available bus

they had to get home from their suburban jobs left at 8 p.m., so they couldn't work until 9:30 p.m. as their employer had asked. Wages, housing, and transportation policies all conspire to create the challenges of poverty.

On the bus trip, in Memphis, at a town hall meeting, a 7-year-old told us that one of the divides she saw in her community was that parents had to work too many hours and couldn't spend enough time with their children. When I asked how she knew this she said that her mom had to work nights and she hardly ever saw her. Pope Francis says that parents need to earn enough to support their families and to have leisure time with them. Speaker Ryan made headlines when he told his Congressional colleagues that he needed time with his family. Children flourish when parents have the capacity to both support them AND to spend time with them. All of our families need this simple opportunity.

In Evansville, I met Chloe, a college freshman, who told me that the cost of higher education was too much for her and her family. She told me that some of her high school classmates did not go on to college because they didn't want to add to the debt of their families. What does it say about the future of our nation when our children and young people can't pursue higher education because of costs? We are hurting our nation by stifling the creativity of our young people. We are not caring for our posterity as it calls us to do in the Constitution.

In Kansas City, I met 15-year-old Katherine, the oldest of six siblings. Her parents had been working at menial jobs supporting their family. But they were deported this past March when they went to pay a traffic ticket. Now, Katherine and her younger siblings (four of whom are U.S. citizens) live with their elderly grandmother. This is overwhelming for this elderly woman and catastrophic for this family. Katherine appeared to me to be the principle care taker of her siblings as she held the toddler and kept an eye on the rambunctious siblings. Most heartbreaking for me was then I heard that Katherine's 12-year-old sister attempted suicide in May because she thought that one less child would help makes things better for her family. Our broken immigration system is tearing families apart, destroying children, and exacerbating the challenges of poverty.

Another important program we don't often hear about is the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The recent recession demonstrates how programs like this are needed to protect the unemployed and underemployed. In the recent recession this failure of welfare reform did not expand to serve those families struggling after unemployment insurance payments ran out. TANF failed our people and needs to be changed for the common good.

We as a nation are better than this. We are better if our communities are stronger. We must pay a just price to do the work that needs to be done to heal our society and for the hope of our future.

The Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit need to be made permanent and expanded. We need living wages so that our people have enough to get by. Housing policy and public transportation need to be strengthened to serve working families. Education must be made affordable so that all have access to opportunity. Our broken immigration

system must be fixed. We need Congress to strengthen programs that are designed to help hardworking families and individuals.

We need to transform our economy to prioritize the common good and support our people. This is the economy that Pope Francis spoke about when he addressed Congress this past September. He invoked the memory of Abraham Lincoln and the quest for a new birth of freedom and challenged all of us to see the "open wounds" of our society by confronting every form of polarization.

While this is the vision of the leader of my faith tradition, it is also the best of our Constitution. If we respond to the wounds of our time, then we are indeed "We the People" working together to form a more perfect union, establish justice and ensuring domestic tranquility. This is our challenge and our call.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here. I look forward to today's conversation.