

America falls short of Isaiah's vision, poverty expert insists

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In light of overwhelming poverty in the United States, people of faith need to heed the words of the ancient Jewish prophet Isaiah, Greg Kaufmann, senior fellow with the [Center for American Progress](#), told a gathering of anti-hunger activists in Waco.



God wants his people to “loose the chains of injustice,” “set the oppressed free,” and “share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter,” Kaufmann said, quoting Isaiah 58, a passage

traditionally read during the Jewish holy day Yom Kippur, which began the day after his presentation.

“If you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday,” he continued.

“So, Isaiah offers us this beautiful, powerful vision, and we know it’s one that we are much, much too far from fulfilling. What’s worse, we’re moving in the wrong direction in too many ways,” Kaufmann told participants at the recent [Together at the Table Hunger and Poverty Summit](#) at Baylor

University.

The [Texas Hunger Initiative](#)—a project within the Baylor School of Social Work, launched in partnership with [Texas Baptists' Christian Life Commission](#)—sponsored the summit in conjunction with [Feeding Texas](#) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food & Nutrition Service Southwest Regional Office.

45 million Americans in poverty

One in seven Americans—more than 45 million people—live in poverty, including one of five American children, said Kaufmann, former poverty correspondent for *The Nation*.

“If we look even deeper in poverty—below half the poverty line, to people living on less than \$9,300 annually for a family of three—that describes nearly 20 million people, or one in 15 Americans. And it’s nearly 60 percent more than the number of people living in poverty in 2000,” he said.

Even the 106 million Americans who live somewhere below twice the poverty line—on less than \$37,000 annually for a family of three—are struggling, he added. “These are all people who are just a serious illness, lost job or some other single hardship away from poverty.”

In part, Kaufmann blamed low-wage jobs, noting in 2011, nearly 30 percent of all American workers earned wages that kept them below the poverty line.

Wealth concentrated at the top

“It’s not that wealth isn’t being created. It’s just concentrated at the very top,” he said.

IRS data indicates 95 percent of the economic gains from 2009 through 2012 went to the top 1 percent, and 60 percent went to the top 0.1

percent—people with incomes topping \$1.9 million, he noted.

Meanwhile, the working poor struggle to get by on a minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, Kaufmann observed.

“In the late 1960s, the minimum wage was sufficient for a full-time worker to lift a family of three out of poverty. Not so anymore,” he said. “Now, that same worker earns around \$15,000, more than \$4,000 below the poverty line. Had Congress indexed the wage to inflation—as they do for individual campaign contribution limits, for example—it would stand at \$10.86 an hour.”

As a result, 49 million people—more than 14 percent of households in the United States—were food insecure last year, he said. And that includes one in five children.

“So, how is our nation responding to the hungry among us?” he asked.

Congress cutting benefits

Congress cut benefits offered through SNAP—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as Food Stamps. And of 17 witnesses to appear at five hearings House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan convened to offer a progress report on the War on Poverty, the committee allowed only one person living in poverty to testify.

“That is pretty much the status quo in Washington, where low-income people are talked about plenty, and often disparagingly, but rarely engaged,” Kaufmann said.

Between 2007 and 2013, the number of American families with children living in shelters or other emergency housing increased about 32 percent. The Department of Education reported 1.3 million homeless students during the 2012-13 school year.

“What is perhaps most frustrating about the way we are treating the hungry, struggling families on the brink and those in need of shelter is that we know these investments can work to turn lives around,” Kaufmann said.

Importance of a ‘safety net’

“Multiple studies have demonstrated that poverty would be twice as high today—nearly 30 percent instead of 15 percent—if it weren’t for the safety net. That is what light rising from darkness looks like.”

Jews view the “Days of Awe”—the 10 days between the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—as a time to listen, learn, empathize and act, Kaufmann said.

“These are the skills we need as we turn inward, to take stock of where we are; in order to then turn outward, and head in the direction we want to go as individuals and a community,” he said.

The goal of these efforts, he explained, is to move toward *tikkum olam*—healing the world.

“These Days of Awe are also characterized by something else we all relate to—yearning. ... My hope is that we carry our yearning with us, and that we yearn for the betterment of all people’s lives, just as we yearn for the betterment of our own,” he said.