

**Opening Statement of Chairman Bernard Sanders
Subcommittee on Primary Health and Aging
Is Poverty a Death Sentence?
September 13, 2011**

Good morning, I'd like to thank all of you for being here today to discuss a very sobering issue. I would especially like to thank all of the witnesses for taking time from their busy schedules to share their perspectives with our subcommittee.

The reason that I called this hearing is that the issue that we're discussing today gets far too little public discussion. It is very rarely talked about in the media, and talked about even less in Congress. Yet it is one of the great moral and economic issues facing our country.

Today, there are nearly 44 million Americans living below the poverty line - the largest number on record. Since 2000, nearly 12 million more Americans have slipped into poverty.

Further, according to the latest figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States has both the highest overall poverty rate and the highest childhood poverty rate of any major industrialized country on earth. This also comes at a time when the U.S. also has the most unequal distribution of wealth and income of any major country on earth with the top 1 percent earning more than the bottom 50 percent.

According to the latest figures from the OECD published on April 4, 2011, 21.6 percent of American children live in poverty. This compares to 3.69 percent, in Denmark, Finland (5.25 percent); Norway (5.48 percent); Iceland (6.7 percent); Slovenia (6.87 percent); Sweden (6.95 percent); Austria (7.15 percent); Hungary (7.24 percent); Germany (8.29 percent); the Czech Republic (8.8 percent); France (9.3 percent); Switzerland (9.4 percent), etc. I suppose we can take some comfort in that our numbers are not quite as bad as Turkey (23.5 percent); Chile (24 percent); and Mexico (25.8 percent).

When we talk about poverty in America, a lot of thoughts go through our minds. We think about people who may be living in substandard and overcrowded homes or may be homeless. We think about people who live with food insecurity, who may not know how they are going to feed themselves or their kids tomorrow. We think about people who, in cold states like Vermont, may not have enough money to purchase the fuel they need to keep warm in the winter. We think about people who cannot afford health insurance or access to medical care. We think about people who cannot afford an automobile or transportation, and can't get to their job or the grocery store. We think about senior citizens who may have to make a choice between buying the prescription drugs he or she needs, or purchasing an adequate supply of food.

Today, however, I want to focus on one enormously important point. And that is that poverty in America today leads not only to anxiety, unhappiness, discomfort and a lack of material goods. It leads to death. Poverty in America today is a death sentence for tens and tens of thousands of our people which is why the high childhood poverty rate in our country is such an outrage.

Some facts:

At a time when we are seeing major medical breakthroughs in cancer and other terrible diseases for the people who can afford those treatments, the reality is that life expectancy for low-income women has declined over the past 20 years in 313 counties in our country. In other words, in some areas of America, women are now dying at a younger age than they used to.

In America today, people in the highest income group level, the top 20 percent, live, on average, at least 6.5 years longer than those in the lowest income group. Let me repeat that. If you are poor in America you will live 6.5 years less than if you are wealthy or upper-middle class.

In America today, adult men and women who have graduated from college can expect to live at least 5 years longer than people who have not finished high school.

In America today tens of thousands of our fellow citizens die unnecessarily because they cannot get the medical care they need. According to Reuters, September 17, 2009, Nearly 45,000 people die in the United States each year – one every 12 minutes – in large part because they lack health insurance and cannot get good care. Harvard Medical School researchers found in an analysis released on Thursday.”

In 2009, the infant mortality rate for African American infants was twice that of white infants.

I recite these facts because I believe that as bad as the current situation is with regard to poverty, it will likely get worse in the immediate future. As a result of the greed, recklessness and illegal behavior of Wall Street we are now in the midst of the worst economic downturn since the 1930s. Millions of workers have lost their jobs and have slipped out of the middle class and into poverty. Poverty is increasing.

Further, despite the reality that our deficit problem has been caused by the recession and declining revenue, two unpaid for wars and tax breaks for the wealthy, there are some in Congress who wish to decimate the existing safety net which provides a modicum of security for the elderly, the sick, the children and lower income people. Despite an increase in poverty, some of these people would like to cut or end Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, LIHEAP, nutrition programs and help for the disabled and the homeless.

To the degree that they are successful, there is no question in my mind that many more thousands of men, women and children will die.

Let me conclude by saying that from a moral perspective, it is not acceptable that we allow so much unnecessary suffering and preventable death to continue. Further, from an economic perspective and as we try to fight our way out of this terrible recession, it makes no sense that we push to the fringe so many people who could be of such great help to us.