

[Opinion](#)

America Is Guilty of Neglecting Kids: Our Own

By [Nicholas Kristof](#)

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A family in Flint, Mich. Lead in the public water system endangered the health of city residents, particularly children. Credit Brittany Greeson/The New York Times

It's not just the kids at the border.

America systematically shortchanges tens of millions of children, including homegrown kids. The upshot is that American kids are more likely to be poor, to drop out of high school and even to die young than in other advanced countries.

We tear apart homegrown families, too, through mass incarceration, excessive juvenile detention and overuse of foster care. One black child in 10 spends time in foster care — and [61,000 foster kids](#) have simply gone missing since 2000.

Like immigration, the mistreatment of children is an old problem that President Trump is exacerbating. Here's a rule of thumb in America for any shortage of resources or conflict over priorities: Kids get screwed.

“A shockingly high number of children in the U.S. live in poverty,” the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, [declared](#) in a scathing report. Almost one-fifth of American children live in poverty, [he noted](#), and they account for more than one-fifth of homeless people.

Alston told me that “there’s a very direct link” between the mistreatment of immigrant children at the border and the indifference toward low-income children all across the country. The core reason, he suggested, is a lack of compassion.

Nikki Haley, the American ambassador to the United Nations, [protested](#) the U.N. report, saying, “It is patently ridiculous for the United Nations to examine poverty in America.”

Really, Ambassador Haley?

Yes, it’s weird that a U.N. official tasked with poverty investigates the most powerful country in the world — and finds that kids here have worms. I’m glad that the U.N. speaks up not only for impoverished children in Congo, but also for those in, say, South Carolina (where a newborn black child has a shorter life expectancy than a child born in China).

Two researchers, Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer, have [found](#) that some three million American children live in “extreme poverty,” with a cash income of less than \$2 per person per day, the global metric for extreme poverty.

That’s not to say that poverty in America is comparable to that in poor countries. American kids may go to bed hungry, but very few are stunted from malnutrition, compared with 38 percent of children in India.

The paradox is that the United States historically was a safe and nurturing place for children. America helped lead the world in mass education, and in 1960 children here died at lower rates than in most other advanced countries.

Since about 1970, however, as other countries provided universal health care and built up social safety nets, American kids have been dying at higher rates. A child is 57 percent more likely to die by the age of 19 in the U.S. than in our peer countries, according to [a study](#) published this year in Health Affairs.

Half a million American kids still suffer from lead poisoning each year. And Dr. Peter Hotez, a tropical disease specialist at Baylor’s College of Medicine, warns that here in the United States, “Millions of children living in poverty may be affected by toxocarasis, a parasitic roundworm infection.”

Why do we stiff kids? Why do we provide universal health care for senior citizens (which is expensive) but not for children (which would be cheap)? The simple answer: Kids don't vote. They depend on us, and we fail them.

If we can broaden the current outrage to the plight of all children in America, we could transform lives.

In Arkansas, I once dropped in on the home of a [struggling 13-year-old boy](#). It was a filthy flophouse for drug users in a gang-ridden area. There were no books in the house, and no food; the only reason the power wasn't cut off for nonpayment was the pit bull kept to scare off the utility crew.

These are difficult problems but not hopeless ones, and we know what works. Early childhood programs in particular make a huge difference: parent coaching, high-quality prekindergarten, lead poisoning interventions, social worker visits, and mentoring.

World Bank President Jim Yong Kim cites a study indicating that if the U.S. invested in effective early childhood programs, the lifelong benefits would be so transformative that American inequality could be reduced to Canadian levels.

We already have a model: When Tony Blair was the British prime minister he undertook a major campaign against child poverty and cut it nearly in half.

Unfortunately, Trump is moving in the opposite direction, cutting benefit programs in ways that will hurt poor kids. Trump's tax cuts add to the deficit — meaning that we are partying and sticking children with the bill.

A national, bipartisan outcry forced Trump to back down from tearing immigrant children from their parents' arms at the border; that was a shared outpouring of compassion that represented our country's best. Now we need a similar outcry on behalf of all of America's children.