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Written Statement of

Dr. Jamila Michener

Associate Professor of Government and Public Policy
Cornell University

For Hearing on

Poverty and Concentrated Poverty in Small and Medium Sized Cities
Senate Standing Committee on Cities 2

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Chairwoman May, members of the Senate Standing Committee on Cities 2, and everyone participating today: thank you for holding this hearing to examine the causes and consequences of poverty in New York’s medium-and small-sized cities. Understanding poverty more clearly and forging policy pathways to alleviating it are among the highest order priorities that we face in the state of New York.

My name is Jamila Michener. I am an associate professor of government and public policy at Cornell University. I am also co-director of the Cornell Center for Health Equity and incoming inaugural director for Cornell’s new Center for Racial Justice and Equitable Futures. My research is focused on poverty, racial inequality, and public policy—with emphases on health and housing. My work also focuses on the power and agency of those same people by considering how they can exercise influence over the conditions that most profoundly affect their lives, families, and communities. My comments today highlight the structural and systemic roots of poverty, debunking common misunderstandings about the causes of poverty.

When I started college more than 20 years, the first course I signed up for was a on poverty. When I started teaching at Cornell more than ten years ago, the first course I taught was one focused on poverty. A basic question driving my teaching and research preoccupation is quite straightforward: *why?* In a country and a state with access to immense resources, why do people live in poverty? Especially given that the United States is a striking outlier among wealthy democracies.¹ One thing I’ve realized as I’ve taught about and studied poverty throughout my adult life, is that misunderstandings of its causes and consequences are the rule rather than the

¹ See: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adg1469>

exception. For that reason, it is crucial to clarify critical facts about poverty that can serve as a basis for discussion, deliberation, and decision-making. We might call this poverty myth busting.

1. Many people think of poverty as a phenomenon experienced by “others.” Yet, a significant majority of Americans will experience poverty during their life course. Research indicates that **59 percent of Americans will spend at least one year below the official poverty line between the ages of 20 and 75.** That number rises to **76 percent if we include people who come close** to the arbitrary (and low) threshold we set for poverty in the United States, even if they do not technically fall below it.² Indeed, the longitudinal tracking of poverty in New York is consistent with this larger national picture. Majorities of New Yorkers moving into and out of poverty throughout their life course.³ If poverty is something that will affect most people at some point in their lives, then it stands to reason that individuals are not the cause of poverty. It is not as though 76 percent of Americans are lazy or make choices sufficiently bad to warrant a life of deprivation. Instead, poverty is a systemic problem: housing, healthcare, labor market, criminal legal, and other systems play a key role in producing and exacerbating poverty. These same systems operate in ways that differentially distribute poverty across geographies and racial/ethnic groups.
2. Many people assume that poverty is mostly a big city problem. I grew up in New York city and lived on the South side of Chicago for nearly seven years, so I’m certainly not denying the staggering reality of urban poverty. Yet, the empirical record belies the assumption of poverty as a primarily urban phenomenon. There are more people living in poverty in medium-to-small sized cities, suburbs, and rural areas than there are people living in “inner city” poverty.⁴ This is particularly true as the ever-rising costs of

² See: <https://confrontingpoverty.org/poverty-facts-and-myths/most-americans-will-experience-poverty/>

³ <https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/poverty-in-new-york-city#:~:text=While%20annual%20rates%20show%20that,in%20and%20out%20of%20poverty.>

⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/post-pandemic-poverty-is-rising-in-americas-suburbs/>

housing spread across all sorts of geographies. Significant growth in rents, for example, have been occurring in both large and small-mid-sized cities.⁵ In particular, for households with income less than \$34,999, rental cost burden rates are above 80 percent across all city size categories.⁶

3. People often assume that poverty is readily avoided by “playing by the rules.” Per this formulation, following the right sequence of successful (and moral) choices is the surest way to avoid penury. Getting married before having children, going to school, working hard, etc. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) supposition underlying this narrative is that poverty is a function of individual behavior that can be addressed by fixing “the poor.” However, the empirical evidence does not support this story. Even among families that do all the “right” things—graduating from high school, working, having children when you’re not young and in the context of marriage—there is still a 7.4% poverty rate. Indeed, careful empirical research reveals that “most of the population in poverty is similar to the U.S. population in terms of employment, age, family structure, and education.”⁷ People experiencing poverty are not simply make bad choices.

I could go on at length with poverty myth busting, but there are not enough hours in the day (and certainly not in this hearing) to do so. As I close out my comments, I want to turn to one final fact about poverty. This core reality has been demonstrated by a growing consensus of scholars: poverty is a political choice.⁸ By this I mean that poverty is largely function of policy decisions about the generosity of public programs, the strength and accessibility of the safety net, the affordability and availability of critical resources like housing and food, and the

⁵ <https://furmancenter.org/thestoop/entry/housing-characteristics-of-small-and-mid-sized-cities>

⁶ <https://furmancenter.org/thestoop/entry/housing-characteristics-of-small-and-mid-sized-cities>

⁷ <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adg1469>

⁸ For example, see: Brady, David, Agnes Blome, and Hanna Kleider. 2016. “How Politics and Institutions Shape Poverty and Inequality.” *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty*; Brady, David. “Theories of the Causes of Poverty.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 45 (2019): 155-175; Royce, Edward. *Poverty and Power: The Problem of Structural Inequality*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2022; Desmond, Matthew. *Poverty, by America*. Crown Publishing, 2023.

degree of protection that people have from predation, harm, and exploitation (for example: from bosses in the workplace, landlords in the neighborhood, etc.). No matter how independent, hardworking, industrious, and disciplined any given person might be, every New Yorker is embedded in a set of overlapping systems that indelibly structure their vulnerability to poverty. No one can stand alone and unassisted in the face of sickness, unexpected tragedy, unavoidable job loss, a volatile and unforgiving economy, inescapable human frailty, onerous care responsibilities for children and elders, and so much more. These are aspects of the human condition that require comprehensive, bold, and admittedly difficult action on the part of state government. Such action recognizes and respects the bonds of our common humanity while securing the longevity and strength of our democracy—which is most certainly undermined by the enduring problem of poverty.