

The Promise of National Service to Improve Quality of Life in The United States: A Summary of the Evidence in Brief

The United States of America is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, leading the world in technology, innovation, and the pursuit of democracy. However, economic inequities and health disparities hinder many Americans from realizing the rights promised in the Declaration of Independence. Over 20 million Americans live on less than \$7.55 a day with a quality of life that mirrors some of the poorest nations in the world. By working at the local level with communities through a multi-generation and diverse national service corps, the Declaration Initiative (TDI) seeks to improve the quality of life for people at the bottom 10% of the income distribution.

The following factors disproportionately impact those in this lowest 10 percent, keep them in poverty and severely undermine their access to life, liberty, and their pursuit of happiness.

1. Maternal illness and death
2. Infant mortality
3. Deficient language proficiency by age 3 and reading by age 9
4. Failure to graduate from high school
5. Early, repeated and prolonged incarceration

In the US **maternal mortality** rates have increased fourfold since 1937, and as many as 46 countries do a better job of making childbirth safe. Black women are disproportionately impacted (3.4 to 1), and half of maternal deaths overall are considered preventable. Strategies that decrease maternal mortality include nurse visiting programs, routine prenatal screening, maternal mortality case reviews, and improved access to prenatal care. These strategies are affordable. For example, nurse home visiting programs can save up to \$3 in hospital costs for every dollar spent. Hospital promotion of breastfeeding costs only \$164 per life saved.

The **infant mortality** rate in the US was 5.87 per 1000 live births in 2015, and the rate for blacks is twice that of whites. The US ranks 32nd out of 34 high-income countries for this important barometer of community health. Scientifically supported strategies include prenatal mother-nurse partnerships, home visiting for mothers and infants, sleep recommendations, and community interventions related to air quality, food, housing and job readiness. These programs save lives and reduce health care costs.

Childhood literacy, including proficient language by age 3 and reading skills by age 9 are critical for cognitive development, self-esteem, health, and educational success. Currently children in low-income settings hear 13 million fewer words by age 4, and 80% are not proficient readers by 4th grade. A number of early childhood language and reading programs are scientifically supported. Early childhood preschool programs and shared reading programs can provide \$4 to \$8 returns on every dollar

spent, and children who participate can expect to earn more money during their lifetime.

High school graduation rates for low-income students, at 69%, and black students, at 70%, is lower than that of the general population at 81.4%. On average, individuals without a diploma live 5 fewer years than graduates, earn 10K less annually, and only 4% exercise their right to vote. A range of graduation promotion programs have been scientifically supported, and research estimates that governments savings related to each additional graduate over a lifetime is between \$187-\$240,000, with even higher societal savings.

Incarceration affects one out of 15 black males and 1 out of 106 white males. The annual cost to the state of incarcerating one individual is \$32,000. Expert opinion supports treatment alternatives, increased substance abuse treatment, and therapy and rehabilitation efforts. Examples of savings related to these strategies include 3 to 1 savings associated with adult drug court, as well as savings associated with adult court diversion and mental health courts.

The Declaration Initiative proposes to develop local service programs to build community capacity to provide evidenced-based support and care to children and families in low-income settings. TDI will draw on successes of programs such as AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, Teach for America, the US Military Service, and faith-based service groups of all denominations. The TDI multi-generational approach will engage Americans in service and citizenship across their lifespan from young adulthood through retirement. TDI will work with communities to adapt effective programs to their local context and harness local creativity and wisdom to improve the quality of life for children and families.

Full Report: Grande KM, Kahle ER, Thompson-Fleming R, Shrestha S, Carpenter E, Tran-Inzeo P., Brown, LD. (2015). The promise of national service to improve the quality of life in the United States: A summary of the evidence. University of Wisconsin-Madison: The Declaration Initiative.