

Poverty's price tags

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[A report released today by the Children's Defense Fund](#) details how the U.S. could reduce child poverty by 60 percent.

Specific targets are important in anti-poverty work, and this is an ambitious one (though less ambitious than the report's title, *Ending Child Poverty Now*). CDF's policy proposals include a larger Earned Income Tax Credit and (not [or](#)) a higher minimum wage, along with expanded housing subsidies, child care subsidies, and food stamps. Add some more generous rules for tax credit refunds and child support recipients' federal benefits—along with a new subsidized jobs program—and the whole thing starts to sound pretty expensive.

Sure, says CDF: \$77.2 billion. Also known as the price of the F-35 fighter jet program, which is years behind schedule and billions over budget. Which is more important? The F-35, or lifting millions of children out of poverty?

CDF offers several other ideas for offsetting the cost of such a program as well. While these aren't serious suggestions as one-to-one trades, they do draw attention to a sobering fact: antipoverty work isn't prohibitively expensive so much as it is a low priority. After all, most policymakers are pretty far removed from the lives of poor children.

Perusing the CDF report today, I was reminded of a fascinating online conversation earlier this month. "What do insanely poor people buy," [asked a Redditor](#), "that ordinary people know nothing about?" I grew up low income but not poor, and I was startled by some of the replies, by how people keep themselves and their families fed:

"When I was child, Burger King ran a special kids meal where it was two mini Burgers that were attached to each other like a weird conjoined burger experiment. Sometimes we would go. My dinner was 1.5 of the mini burgers, my

moms dinner was the half I didn't eat and she would fill up on the free refills of soda.”

“We would get a to-go salad box for about 3.50, fill the whole thing with about five pounds of shredded cheese, which cost about \$3 a pound. Boom, a bunch of cheese for all the grilled cheese sandwiches you can make with your \$0.25 bakery outlet bread loaves.”

“One time i watched my little brother eat an entire raw onion because thats all we had, it was sad and impressive all at the same time.”

“We used to have to go to school sick because we got free lunch at school.”

Or clothed:

“My mom would always go to this store that sold heavily discounted irregulars and put it on layaway for our new school clothes.”

“As a kid, I would come home for weeks, bleeding from cuts all over my feet. Apparently, the soles in bargain-basement running shoes would get shredded every few months.”

“Underwear and socks at the thrift store”

Or healthy:

“I buy ‘fish’” antibiotics online because I can't afford health care.”

“My office only has a unisex bathroom so it has the facilities for men and women. Naturally there's a tampon machine, and tampons are only 5 cents. Once a month I'll work late, get a roll of nickels and fill up a grocery sack with tampons for my wife.”

The thread is also filled with stories of small kindnesses: strangers filling gas tanks, teachers providing breakfast, a utility company employee hinting that the word “self-employed” makes it easier to get service than “unemployed.” People who have been poor tell such stories with deep gratitude.

But random acts of kindness won't significantly reduce poverty. To do that, we'll have to actually make it a national priority.