

Boston Human Rights City Initiative  
Input to the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights  
4 October, 2017

Dear Professor Alston,

We look forward to your upcoming mission to the United States in your capacity as the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. We, the Boston Human Rights City Initiative (BHRCI), welcome your input, and thank you for scheduling this visit at a time when it is most needed.

BHRCI is a budding network of community based organizations, individuals, and academics whose aim is to make Boston a city where human rights flourish, and where all are able to live with dignity. Boston's City Council signed a resolution declaring the city a "human rights city" in 2011. Yet, we remain a human rights city in name only. Our goal is to see the goals set out in the resolution become a reality. We have partnered with several local organizations, including the University of Massachusetts at Boston, Encuentro5, The City School, Global Zero, Northeastern University's Program on Human Rights and the Global Economy, the Color of Water Campaign, Suffolk Law School's Indigenous Rights Clinic, and former City Council member Charles Yancey, among others, to attempt to transform the city. Unfortunately, we are far from achieving this goal.

Despite Boston's reputation as a progressive "city on a hill," rampant poverty and inequality mar the lives of its diverse residents:

- The Brookings institution has named Boston the American city with the most income inequality for the year 2014.<sup>1</sup>
- Roughly half of Boston residents who work make less than \$35,000 per year.
- Over a quarter of Boston's population lives under the United States' meager poverty line—this figure is even higher when the data are disaggregated by race.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, this very reputation makes Boston's poverty even more insidious. It often flies under the radar in the national and local consciousness because economic malaise and unemployment are not generalized and rather affect marginalized segments of the city's population. Indeed, although Boston enjoys widespread employment, its high cost of living means the city's median wage of \$35,273<sup>3</sup> falls short. For the roughly half of city residents who make less than \$35,000/year, poverty is a near-guaranteed reality: the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/city-and-metropolitan-inequality-on-the-rise-driven-by-declining-incomes/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/document-file-07-2017/resilient\\_boston.pdf](https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/document-file-07-2017/resilient_boston.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://owd.boston.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2015-Office-of-Workforce-Development-Workforce-Report-Booklet\\_v1\\_r8\\_spreads.pdf](https://owd.boston.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2015-Office-of-Workforce-Development-Workforce-Report-Booklet_v1_r8_spreads.pdf)

estimates that a family of four would need to make roughly \$73,211/year, before taxes, to survive in Boston.<sup>4</sup>

We argue that poverty should be judged contextually. In the context of the extreme inequality that prevails in Boston, many of its citizens live in extreme poverty relative to the financial demands the city economy makes of any person who is to have an adequate standard of living within its borders. Hence, the absolute definition of poverty as living on less than \$1.25/day does not suffice as it does not allow for an accurate assessment of the state of poverty in much of the developed world. This definition has the particularly negative consequence of failing to recognize the ways in which the structure of modern economies in the global north contributes to increasing poverty and widening inequality because the definition excludes the especially significant category of people in the United States who are “working poor” – that is, people who sometimes work multiple jobs and yet still cannot amass enough income or wealth to reach an adequate standard of living.

Against this backdrop, we therefore argue that the inequality and insufficiency of income described prevents many of Boston’s residents’ human rights enjoyment in a number of ways:

- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 26:** Boston’s income inequality is even more intense for people of color. While the median income for a white household is nearly \$76,000 dollars, a Hispanic or Latino and Black families can expect to make only \$34,500 or \$42,100, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, wealth is even more unequal: white households have a median net wealth of \$247,500, while the average black household’s median wealth is just \$8.<sup>6</sup> These income differences are the state and city’s responsibility to correct, but have widened since the economic crisis—this is a clear violation of article 26. Moreover, the majority of Boston’s population is nonwhite.<sup>7</sup> These data suggest that the vast majority of Boston’s poorest residents are people of color.<sup>8</sup>
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26:** Boston’s poverty is directly correlated with the right to education. In all of the city’s richest neighborhoods, between 0-15% of the population has a high school degree or less. In the poorest neighborhoods, notably East Boston, parts of Dorchester and Roxbury, Roslindale, and Hyde Park, upwards of 80% of the population has a high school diploma or less.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/25025>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.umb.edu/iaas/census/acs/data by race and latino origin in ma 2014](https://www.umb.edu/iaas/census/acs/data%20by%20race%20and%20latino%20origin%20in%20ma%202014)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/document-file-07-2017/resilient\\_boston.pdf](https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/document-file-07-2017/resilient_boston.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> only 47% of Boston’s population was white in 2010, according to the Boston Public Health Commission [http://www.bphc.org/healthdata/health-of-boston-report/Documents/HOB-2014-2015/1 Demographics HOB%202014-2015.pdf](http://www.bphc.org/healthdata/health-of-boston-report/Documents/HOB-2014-2015/1%20Demographics%20HOB%202014-2015.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/document-file-07-2017/resilient\\_boston.pdf](https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/document-file-07-2017/resilient_boston.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [https://owd.boston.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2015-Office-of-Workforce-Development-Workforce-Report-Booklet\\_v1\\_r8\\_spreads.pdf](https://owd.boston.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2015-Office-of-Workforce-Development-Workforce-Report-Booklet_v1_r8_spreads.pdf)

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 24:** many residents of Boston work multiple jobs to make ends meet, and often still make less than the living wage for the city. We would be happy to put you in touch with some of these residents.

Although there are many rights that are not enjoyed by Boston's residents living in relative poverty, we would be more interested in putting you in touch with them than enumerating all of those rights here. Many Bostonians do not get the opportunity to voice their lived experience and be taken seriously due to half-baked commitments to equality by local and state governments. We believe the principle of participation is most important here.

We implore you to consider adding Boston to your itinerary during your mission to the United States. Your visit here would be welcomed by many in the city, and we would be happy to show you some of the most egregious instances of poverty.

Thank you, again, for giving attention to this critical issue that affects so many people in the United States. With your help, we can bring much needed attention to the insidious relative poverty that has expanded in the shadows for so long.

Sincerely,

Boston's Human Rights City Initiative