

UN rights expert chides US government's 'systematic assault' on welfare

The principal strategy for dealing with extreme poverty in the USA is to "[criminalise and stigmatise](#)" those who need assistance, according to a United Nations independent human rights expert, in a statement on Tuesday.

That stark assessment of the social divide within one of the world's wealthiest countries comes from UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston who will present his latest report to the Human Rights Council later this month.

It's based on his fact-finding visit to the US last December, where he travelled to California, Alabama, Georgia, West Virginia and Washington, D.C.

Mr. Alston said the Trump Administration had introduced "massive" tax breaks for corporations and the very wealthy, while at the same time orchestrating what he called "a systematic assault on the welfare system."

For Mr. Alston, who is the [UN expert on extreme poverty and human rights](#), it's a strategy that seems driven primarily by contempt, and sometimes even by hatred for the poor, along with a 'winner takes all' mentality.

"Locking up the poor precisely because they are poor, greatly exaggerating the amount of fraud in the system, shaming those who need assistance, and devising ever more obstacles to prevent people from getting needed benefits, is not a strategy to reduce or eliminate poverty," he said.

He accused the US legal system of focusing on raising revenue for individual states, as opposed to promoting justice, adding that "fines and fees are piled up so that low level infractions become immensely burdensome, a process that mostly affects the poorest members of society".

But at the same time, he said: "judges set large bail amounts for defendants awaiting trial, allowing the rich to pay their way to freedom, while the poor sit in jail unable to work or provide for their families."

Mr Alston added that with the US now having the highest income inequality in the Western world, the highest incarceration rate globally, and one of the lowest election turnout rates among developed nations, "it is no coincidence that high inequality coincides with the overt and covert disenfranchisement of millions and millions of American voters."