

2026 State of the Union Essay Contest Winning Essays



U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders

Winner

Saralynn Anderson (Essex High School, Junior)

Mental health

Second Place

Max Clegg (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)

Corporate power

Third Place

Ada Allen (Craftsbury Academy, Sophomore)

Afterschool programs

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

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Alice Buhendwa (Winooski High School, Junior)

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Andrew Walsh (Essex High School, Junior)

Winner
Saralynn Anderson (Essex High School, Junior)

Mental health affects how people think, act, and feel every day, yet millions of Americans, especially adolescents, are unable to access the care they need. In classrooms across the United States, students struggle silently with anxiety, depression, and overwhelming pressure, often long before adults notice. While mental health care is just as essential as physical health care, it remains underfunded and inaccessible for many young people.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 23.1% of adults in the United States experience some form of mental illness, yet only 50.6% received treatment. This means nearly half of those affected are left without care. Barriers such as high costs, lack of insurance coverage, and shortages of mental health professionals prevent individuals from getting help, worsening long-term outcomes and quality of life. These same barriers affect adolescents even more severely, as young people are dependent on adults, schools, or insurance plans to access care.

This problem is even more alarming among adolescents. Mental Health America reports that nearly three million adolescents experience frequent thoughts of suicide. Along with this, over seven million adolescents did not receive a preventive health visit. Without early intervention, mental health challenges can negatively affect academic performance, relationships, and future stability. Data from the National Institute of Health show that the primary reasons adolescents do not receive care include a lack of awareness, social stigma, and financial barriers; problems that can and should be addressed through policy.

To confront this issue, I propose the BRIDGE Act: Building Resilience, Intervention, Development, and Guidance for Every Youth Act. This legislation would provide federal funding to schools to expand mental health resources. Schools could hire mental health professionals and offer free counseling, as well as create safe spaces where students can seek help without fear. The act would also support a required mental health education course, equipping students with tools to recognize symptoms, seek help, and challenge harmful stereotypes surrounding mental illness. While some may argue that expanding mental health services in schools would be too expensive, intervening early can significantly reduce long-term healthcare expenses, as well as prevent academic failure, making this investment both practical and financially responsible.

Improving adolescent mental health must start where students spend much of their time: in schools. Regular mental health check-ins, increased counselor availability, and preventative education can address problems early rather than waiting for crises to occur. By investing in youth mental health now, we can improve long-term outcomes, lower future healthcare costs, and foster a healthier generation.

Mental health care is a right, not a privilege. By prioritizing access for adolescents today, the United States can create a future where both adolescents and adults are supported, resilient, and able to thrive.

Second Place
Max Clegg (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)

Currently in the United States, three asset management companies wield unprecedented and dangerous economic power that endangers the democratic and fair state that are bedrock principles to America. Together, Blackrock, Vanguard, and Statestreet manage over \$22 trillion of assets within global corporations. Such substantial power over our free market threatens the economy as we know it, and takes away the voice of the people of America that this country was built on.

What makes this mass concentration of power matter is the large control over corporate decisions. An article from Dr. Reeves Knyght reveals that, “The Big Three,” are the largest shareholders within 88% of S&P 500 companies, with the other two firms being consistently among the other top shareholders. This gives them an unprecedented 25% total ownership of the voting shares within corporate America. They also have large voting control globally. Within the markets of the U.K., Australia, and Japan, they control over 10%. This is a major issue. They are quietly being allowed to sway the decisions of companies that directly affect every single person's lives.

Another significant concern inherent in this issue is that the largest owners of Blackrock are Statestreet and Vanguard, and vice versa. This means that three small boards are allowed to silently sway the decision of the everyday companies that we rely on for personal gain. They get to decide environmental policies, economic choices, and the labor conditions of the most influential companies in the world. Lucian Bebchuk and Scott Hirst, analysts from the Boston University Law Review estimates that within two decades, these three companies could control over 40% of the shareholder votes within the S&P 500. This subsequently means that our lives, our decisions, and how the world operates around us, will be controlled by a small concentration of people that we have never heard of, or voted for. That is unquestionably not the ideals that this country was built on. These ideals are not an example of freedom.

We must act. To protect fair competition, and pure American Democracy, we have to make change. I insist that we must increase transparency within these companies, and reform the ways that corporations act. Congress must further strengthen the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, which gives authority to the SEC to regulate proxy solicitations and require disclosure of voting practices. They also must enact the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, which bans monopolistic behavior and must be further enforced against these anticompetitive concentrations of shareholder voting power.

The economy should not be silently run by opaque governing boards, that the general public has no ability to see. If these three companies are allowed to gain further power, they could be bordering on full monopolized control over every decision we make. To me, that sounds like the dictatorship and oligarchies of Russia and North Korea. We must further increase the power of laws against this “oligopoly” to ensure the democratic and economic safety and freedom that this country was built upon.

Third Place
Ada Allen (Craftsbury Academy, Sophomore)

In a time when America faces political polarization, economic instability, national security threats, as well as social and environmental issues, our citizens are feeling vast pessimism. The nation's future is uncertain, but that doesn't mean it is negative. If we start investing in today's youth, we will foster the future of America.

A meaningful education is the most integral step in students progressing into capable adults. Our youth are detached from their education, as they feel it is irrelevant to them. Standardized test scores provide one snapshot of an educational system failing its youth. According to a 2024 study from the Nation's Report Card on mathematics, 45% of high school seniors received scores below basic, and 33% were at the basic level. For reading, 32% of students were below basic, and 33% were at the basic level. Another disturbing trend is rising truancy rates, with many students not attending class. Additionally, in one 2024 National Education Association survey, it was cited that "74 percent of members said students are acting out and misbehaving," another telling sign that students need stronger educational support.

A key missing piece of the American education system is after-school programs. While some programming is available in U.S. schools, the quality and overall abundance is lacking, leaving students adrift. According to a 2024 survey from the Afterschool Alliance, only 37% of public schools offering any afterschool programming reported that they can accommodate all students who want to participate because of a lack of funding and staff; further, only 28% of schools reported offering any academic enrichment after-school programs. Rather than enriching their school day with meaningful opportunities, students are left isolated.

While these bleak facts may seem insurmountable, schools, communities, and students can work together to create a different world—and I believe our shared American future depends on it. I propose that our government invest in a transformational change, the American Student Community Corps (ASCC). Similar to our investment in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the 1930s, this investment in America's youth and communities would help foster students' intellectual and social growth, while uplifting and building communities.

ASCC would be a nationwide afterschool program available to all students in grades kindergarten through twelfth, serving as a community-centered educational resource. Students would participate in various activities tailored to their age level. Children in grades kindergarten to fifth would focus on building relationships with their community and peers that help to connect them to their education. Children in grades sixth through twelfth would take part in internships of their chosen focus with support from ASCC, becoming active in their community through place-based work and learning. ASCC is a solution for not only students' well-being and intellectual expansion, but also a community capacity-building organization. In a time when we are focused on battling the here and now, choose the future, because there will be a time when the youth of today lead the America of tomorrow, and this matters for all of us.

Finalists
(in alphabetical order)
Piper Buczkowski (Missisquoi Valley Union High School, Junior)

In December of 2025, the Department of Homeland Security announced that there are more than 2.5 million illegal aliens being deported from the US. Allegedly, 1.9 million of those were self deportations. A month after this announcement of apparent success was made, a woman in Minneapolis named Renee Good, who was an American citizen, was fatally shot by an ICE officer. After this incident, ICE alleged that the officer shot her in self defense, although the video footage tells a different story. The fatality caused by Immigration and Customs Enforcement is one of the most harmful challenges America is facing today.

Since Donald Trump assumed presidency in 2025, there has been a 120% increase of ICE agents. In the past year, there have been many videos circulating online platforms exposing the cruel ways ICE has been capturing individuals and even children at school. ICE does not listen to reasoning nor citizenship documents.

Rumeysa Ozturk, a PHD student at Tufts University, was heading to meet up with her friends to break their fast for Ramadan and was approached by ICE agents in plain clothing and masks. They immediately took her phone from her hands, told her they were the police, then brought her to the car to be taken. The Department of Homeland Security claimed they detained her because she was supporting Hamas and because her student visa had expired. Everyone who knew her explained that she had never mentioned Hamas before.

An undocumented 29 year old Guatemalan man named Juan Mendez was in the car with his wife one day and got stopped by ICE. The agents were focused on Juan calling him Antonio. The couple assumed it was a case of mistaken identity and called their attorney and were advised to stay in the car. They refused to unlock the doors and explained to the agents that they are waiting for their attorney to arrive. ICE then proceeded to smash the back car window without waiting another minute. They captured Juan Mendez and locked him up in a detention center. Juan was in the process of becoming a U.S citizen when he was taken.

These are just three incidents that represent acts of violence happening all over the country. It doesn't matter what they say to ICE agents after they get pulled over, even if you show them your identification and citizenship documents, they will still detain you. My solution to this issue is to properly train ICE agents and hold them accountable for their actions. They should not have the power to shoot people, break into cars, or be out of uniform. Every ICE agent will have to show their identification and a warrant. This bill will be called the Renee Good Bill to get justice for her and every other human being that has had their life ruined, threatened, or taken. We, the people, cannot stay silent anymore. America must be reminded that aggressiveness should be the very last option, not the first.

Alice Buhendwa (Winooski High School, Junior)

Hunger is a big problem in the United States, especially for single mothers and their children. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, single parent families are more likely to not have enough food. Many single moms work very hard, but still do not have enough money to buy food. Taking care of kids alone while paying for rent, bills, and groceries is very stressful. No family should have to worry about not having enough food. Until the government protects food help programs and gives more support to single mothers, many families will keep struggling with hunger.

Food is a basic need, and the government should make sure families can afford it. When help is not strong or steady, single moms and their children suffer the most. There is clear proof that hunger is a real problem for single mothers. The U.S. The Department of Agriculture says that single parent families are more likely to not have enough food than two parent families, showing that single moms struggle more with hunger. In addition, research from feeding Americans (urban) shows that millions of children living in single parent households do not always have enough food, and single moms are often the ones trying to feed their kids with little help. Programs like SNAP help families buy groceries, but these programs are sometimes put at risk. During government shutdowns, SNAP benefits were in danger for millions of people. Reports said that about 42 million Americans could lose food help during a shutdown. When this happens, families have to rely on food banks, which often do not have enough food.

To fix this problem, the government must take clear steps. First, food programs like SNAP and WIC should always be fully funded and protected, even during political fights. Research from the Urban institute shows that cuts to SNAP could cause almost 3 million young adults to lose food help, which shows how harmful these cuts can be. I propose a new law that would mandate that SNAP and WIC remain open even if the government shuts down.

Second, the government should make sure benefits are never delayed, so families can buy food on time. When SNAP is delayed or cut, families are forced to depend on food, which often do not have enough food. Third, the government should increase support for single mothers by raising benefits amounts and making it easier to qualify for help. The Urban institute found that higher SNAP benefits helped millions of people stay out of poverty which proves that strong food programs work. These actions would help make sure children do not go hungry.

Hunger should not happen in a rich country like the United States. If the government does its job and protects food help programs, single moms and their children can live healthier and safer lives. Making sure families have food is not a choice, it is a responsibility.

Liam Dickerson (Green Mountain Valley School, Junior)

Since its inception, Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) has become an integral part of our daily lives—over one billion people on earth claim to use it each month. Examples of use may range from creating images to asking questions about the moon. It helps to exceed our basic use of Google search. It can create music and solve some of the world's hardest problems. But at what cost?

While there are so many possibilities with AI, there is one major drawback—A.I. is having a much more negative impact on Climate change than we ever could have imagined. In the past year alone, A.I. has consumed six times more water than Denmark, a country with more than 6 million people. This intense use of water directly correlates to the usage of A.I. In 2025, more than 50% of the global population uses A.I. As a result, large data centers are being built to house the computer systems required by AI. Because of this, A.I. needs water to cool these computing centers.

Along with water consumption, A.I. also uses a vast amount of electricity. One request made through ChatGPT uses as much as ten times as much electricity as a Google search. The mass consumption of electricity has been a recurring trend within the last 3-5 years. According to MIT News, the power requirements of data centers in North America more than doubled within a year, from 2,668 megawatts consumed in 2022 to 5,341 megawatts in 2023. Even when looking into the future, the outlook looks grim. The estimated electricity consumption of data centers is forecasted to reach 1,050 terawatt hours by 2026. This puts the AI data centers fifth in the world for energy consumption.

But whose responsibility is it to manage these unfolding burdens? Are there other things we should be doing? Some companies are implementing climate-aware methods to combat the intense impact that A.I. has. Microsoft, for example, aims to reduce its water consumption and carbon footprint. By 2050, Microsoft claims that it will remove its historical emissions since its founding in 1975. It also aims to replenish more water than it has consumed by 2030. Another company that houses massive data centers is Amazon. Amazon has invested two billion dollars into the Climate Pledge Fund.

These initiatives may seem lofty, but it is encouraging that these companies have these goals to begin with. No one knows what the future holds for the impacts of A.I. on climate change, but if we can find ways to maintain the A.I. infrastructure, we might have a chance. Continuing to engage with corporations such as Microsoft and Amazon in hopes that it will lead to a sustainable future will be key in the coming years. Each step that we can take towards sustainability is a step in the right direction.

Quinten Drugach (Oxbow High School, Junior)

In America, opportunity is often described as limitless, although economic reality tells a different story. While millions of Americans struggle to afford housing, groceries, and healthcare, a small group of billionaires controls an enormous share of the nation's wealth. This gap between the uber wealthy and everyone else is not just an economic issue; it is a threat to American democracy and justice. Instead of taxing billionaires more, the solution is a national wealth circulation requirement. This will mobilize money directly into the real economy.

The share of the U.S. wealth pie owned by the top 0.1 percent grew 59.6 percent from 1989 to 2024, while the share of the U.S. wealth pie owned by the bottom 50 percent of households has declined 26.1 percent. The bottom half of households in America, which is 66 million households, had \$4.1 trillion altogether at the end of 2024. The 905 billionaires in the United States hold a combined \$7.8 trillion in wealth, according to *Forbes* data from September 29, 2025. The rapid growth of widening wealth disparities has given those at the top an unfair advantage in our society, undermining our democracy.

Rather than letting extreme wealth sit idle in financial markets, the federal government could implement a national wealth circulation requirement for billionaires. Under this policy, billionaires would be required to invest a small percentage of their wealth into approved areas annually. These areas include worker profit-sharing programs, affordable housing, small business funds, and domestic infrastructure projects. If billionaires chose not to make these investments themselves, the required amount would instead be collected by the government and used for public programs. My solution does not punish success, but makes sure that extraordinary wealth contributes to the economy that made it possible. By implementing a national wealth circulation requirement, wealth circulation would create and strengthen local communities, jobs, and reduce inequality while protecting American innovation and entrepreneurship.

Wealth inequality and the unprecedented power billionaires hold in America are not accidental outcomes, but rather the result of long-standing economic decisions. Real change will not come from silence or complacency, but from Americans who demand accountability and leaders who put people before profit. This crisis calls for immediate action; If we rise to meet it, we can rebuild a country where the American dream is real, democracy is strong, and the future belongs to everyone, not just the wealthy.

Sophie Hehir (South Burlington High School, Junior)

The United States has become a hyperpolarized, divided nation, largely driven by modern media. Social media and unreliable online news sources are widespread and filled with misinformation. Americans are spending more time online but are struggling to interpret this information. Most Americans have not been educated on the implications of misinformation and partisanship within our media. Misinformation continues to divide us and cause further polarization within our political atmosphere.

A study by the BBC found that over 54% of Americans get their news from social networks like YouTube, X, or Facebook. Social media has overtaken both TV and traditional news sites, which both sit at under 50%. Additionally, Media Literacy Now, an organization dedicated to educating on media, found 46% of Americans aged 19-81 did not learn any media literacy skills in high school. A later survey found that people who rely on social media for news are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. The same study discovered people with high levels of science literacy and critical thinking skills were less likely to believe conspiracy theories.

As the amount of misinformation online increases, so do the numbers of young Americans exposed to it. From 2019-2021, the average screen time of Americans aged 8-18 rose by 17%. However, due to a lack of media literacy education programs, many young Americans are unable to spot false media to which they are exposed. A Stanford study of 3,450 high school students found over two-thirds were unable to distinguish between most false claims. Yet, out of 50 states, only 19 have put in place policies to fund media literacy programs in schools. Students who are exposed to misleading media are more likely to become polarized in their views. As these students become voters, they will be less likely to engage with differing opinions, creating greater rifts in our democracy.

In order to combat the epidemic of misinformation, we need to educate ourselves. Millions of Americans need to learn the skills necessary to understand our digital world and spot misinformation and bias. I propose *The Youth Media Literacy Act* as a solution. This program will provide U.S. public schools with the resources needed to educate students about the digital world. This education would start in our elementary schools and continue through high school, covering topics from reliable news sources to AI use. This educational program has the potential to be a critical component in stopping the spread of misinformation.

We need to give our youth the skills necessary to navigate this new digital world. If more young Americans can successfully identify bias and misinformation in our media, we can bridge the rifts we have created in our society and have a more unified conversation. Digital literacy tools are crucial in order to protect our democracy and educate our youth for a better-informed public and less polarized nation.

Hana Heidebrecht (Burr & Burton Academy, Sophomore)

Each year, the State of the Union address is meant to unite the nation around shared challenges and goals. Ironically, one of the greatest threats currently facing our country is our inability to work together. Political polarization is destroying our democracy.

Disagreement has always existed in American politics, and it is not a problem itself. Debate is essential to democracy. The danger arises when Americans begin to see those they disagree with as less than human. According to a Harvard Youth poll, only about 35% of young Americans believe people with opposing political views still want what's best for the country. It is not uncommon for young people to avoid political conversations altogether, out of fear for conflict and judgment.

At the same time, government trust has plummeted, with a historic low of only about 22% of U.S. adults saying they trust the federal government to do what is right most of the time, according to Pew Research Center. Solving major national issues, like economic inequality and climate change, becomes nearly impossible when citizens lose faith in democratic institutions and elected leaders are unable to collaborate across party lines.

The consequences of polarization are becoming more and more apparent. Congress fails to pass legislation consistently, even on issues with bipartisan agreement. Americans are frustrated with leaders focused on partisan conflict instead of cross-party solutions, and according to Pew Research Center, more than 80% of Americans say Republicans and Democrats are more focused on fighting each other than solving problems. Arguably the most concerning by-product, is that young people feel disconnected from a system that is meant to represent them and their ideas.

As a young American, I believe it is essential that polarization is treated as a threat to our democracy, that requires multiple levels of change. First, we must invest in a comprehensive civic education plan across all public schools. This plan will teach students how the government works, how to evaluate information critically, and why democratic norms are so important. This is necessary to prepare future voters to engage constructively with their government. Second, we must implement ranked-choice voting. This encourages candidates to appeal to a wider range of constituents, instead of just extremists. Third, we must establish a national civic dialogue program to bring together people from different regions, backgrounds, and political parties, and cultivate respectful discussion on shared challenges. Finally, we must push for campaign finance reforms that reduce extreme donors' influence to ensure that everybody feels equally represented.

Unity does not mean uniformity. Americans will always disagree. It is imperative that we reject the idea that democracy cannot function unless one side wins, and encourage respectful, constructive political conversation. By encouraging empathy and prioritizing political education, our democracy can become stronger than ever.

Amelia Hill (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)

Over 25% of women globally experience period poverty in their life, and poor menstrual hygiene can cause physical health risks and has been connected to reproductive and urinary tract infections. Giving access to private facilities with water and safer low-cost menstrual materials could reduce diseases. There is also not easy access to menstrual products for women and girls, particularly during emergencies. Fixing these problems should be a high priority for the government because so many women and girls are struggling with their periods and are offered no help.

Period poverty is no joke. It is a lack of access to resources and facilities that women and young girls need. It also subjects women to injustice and inequality due to menstruation. A study in France said that women experiencing period poverty had gained significant mental issues like depression and anxiety. And also half of the women who had experienced period poverty reported at least one psychological symptom compared to women who had never experienced it. According to the National Library of Medicine, “health challenges involve physical health and mental health. Women who have their menstrual cycle monthly need to have good and safe hygiene products and health facilities to visit if required. The lack of access to harmless and hygienic products has caused women to use other unsafe products.” The government needs to make sure that access to hygienic and sanitary facilities and free menstrual products is available for all women and young girls.

The tampon tax is really hurting women around the world. Menstrual products are taxed like luxury goods instead of basic necessities. The Drexel University College of Medicine said “Having a menstrual product tax exacerbates period poverty and impacts the quality of life of women by decreasing the accessibility of menstrual products. Period products are not a luxury good.” It is a cost that only half of the population has to worry about and not purchasing them isn’t an option. Women need to buy periods products at least once a month and over the typical 35 to 40 years women get periods that is over thousands of times they purchase menstrual products.

The federal government should pass legislation mandating the availability of menstrual products in public spaces. Through different programs, such as Medicaid, they could fund the issuance via grants, direct employers to supply them, and remove taxes, handling them as essential health items.

This isn’t just an issue in America, it is also a global issue affecting almost every single country in the world. Periods are also seen as dirty or shameful and there is a lot of stigma around speaking about periods in public. It causes a lack of education and harms young girls who are afraid to speak up about getting their periods. I hope to see in the future less disgust about periods and seeing the amount of period poverty go down significantly. They are a necessity in our lives and should be more easily accessible.

Matthew Mallory (Essex High School, Junior)

For many Americans the ability to get to work, pick up medicine, or buy groceries is largely taken for granted. However, a large subset of the population lacks access to even these seemingly quotidian abilities. A lack of public transportation infrastructure is reducing quality of life for a large portion of the population and creating a massive cost to America's economy. As interested corporations lobby against legislation, citizens suffer. Citizens need to push legislators to pass legislation supporting the development of such infrastructure in order to reduce the income gap and improve quality of life for Americans.

The issue of public transportation disproportionately affects a poorer subset of the population. According to U.S. News & World Report, in 2024, greater than 16% of Americans living below the Federal Poverty Level (around \$15,000 in annual income) lacked reliable access to transportation, compared to 2.9% of those making greater than four times that level. This significant divide creates a vicious cycle - those lacking transportation are able to capitalize on fewer job opportunities and lack access to regular healthcare, pushing them into lower socioeconomic positions.

With so many Americans affected by a lack of transportation, one would expect rapid change to occur. However, politicians have a vested interest in avoiding such developments. In 2024, over \$150 million was spent by big oil lobbying to avoid eco-friendly policies, with a large chunk of that money targeting public transportation. While the American democratic process should elect politicians whose views more closely match the population, campaign donations provide opponents of public transportation development with an undue advantage in elections. As the petroleum industry approaches \$10 trillion, it's easy to understand why their influence is far greater than efforts from smaller pro-transportation initiatives.

Additionally, as policymakers aren't affected by a lack of transportation, fiscal change is much more difficult to legislate. Americans making over \$150,000 annually were over three times more likely to vote in the 2016 presidential election than those under the poverty level (Johnson). This statistic displays a trend of unintentional underrepresentation at the state and city level as well. This creates yet another vicious cycle: Those that would push the hardest for public transportation spending are those heard the least.

In order to solve the transportation epidemic, a limitation on campaign donations by PAC's is the most effective action. This would remove some outside incentives placed on policymakers to favor the interests of oil companies over their constituents. I next propose a bill, called the United States Public Transportation Act, which would further the effects of the 1964 Urban Mass Transportation Act, giving increased subsidies to cities working to improve their public transportation. It would also broaden the scope of the 1964 act, providing funding for the improvement of high-speed rail networks across the U.S., further benefiting both cost and duration of intercity travel. This inequitable system won't change unless Americans push legislators to open their eyes and take action.

Jumana Nsour (South Burlington High School, Sophomore)

For the fiscal year of 2027, the Trump administration allocated \$1.5 trillion to the Department of War. Simultaneously, the government froze billions of dollars related to childcare assistance, impacting over 1.4 million children. This is a stark reminder of American militarism, which is enormously prevalent today. Repeatedly, the US has claimed its large military is necessary for national security. They continue to ignore that: This imperialism isn't protecting anyone. It is only killing innocent people, and letting billionaires profit off of their slaughter.

According to Al Jazeera, the US has funded over \$21 billion to Israel since October 7th. 73,000 Palestinians, including 20,000 children have been deliberately murdered, making it crystal clear that the US is funding a *genocide*. Meanwhile, the arms industry reached a record breaking revenue of \$679 billion in 2024, largely off of the murders of these children.

Another way the US exerts its imperialism is through unwarranted international interventions. This past year, the US has attacked both Iran and Venezuela. These attacks have been framed as operations to prevent issues in each respective country, like nuclear war and drug trafficking. However, the US used these attacks simply to further Israel's Zionist agenda in the Middle East, and to profit off of Venezuelan oil, notes the BBC. This pattern keeps repeating: The US attacks, civilians die, billionaires profit. It is time to **actually** put America first.

To begin, the military budget must be reduced to an appropriate amount. This can happen by reducing the number of US military bases overseas. Currently, the US has over 750 bases; this amount is doing little to improve national security, according to the CATO Institute. Another way to reduce military spending is to reverse the Citizens United v. FEC case. This will make it harder for companies to disregard their constituents and promote a war economy instead.

Secondly, the US, and all companies affiliated with war crimes must respect the law and face the consequences of their actions in federal and international court.

Thirdly, the United States must invest in a peace economy. This can happen by refunding all domestic and international welfare programs that have faced funding cuts under Trump, and investing in industries with the potential to benefit regular Americans and create jobs. The US should be investing in renewable energy, biotechnology, education, sustainable infrastructure, healthcare, agriculture, and more. This can be possible by raising taxes on the top 1%, who are often the people who profit off of US warfare. Finally, the US must be a positive international influence. To foster diplomacy, the US must rejoin all 66 international organizations that it withdrew from at the start of the 2nd Trump presidency, and re-establish USAID. This diplomacy is essential to preventing future conflicts, and will help communities in need around the globe.

A world with peace and security is possible. If we put the needs of Americans over the greed of arms companies and imperialists, this *can* be achieved.

Kai Pincus (Pacem School, Freshman)

There's no place like home. Unfortunately, home is now a privilege that many cannot afford. In 2024, over 771 thousand people spent a night in the United States without stable housing, and 274,224 of those were without shelter of any kind. In Vermont, which is fourth place in the nation by number of unhoused people, 53 out of 10,000 people are homeless. These numbers are alarming, especially in light of the insensitivity of the current administration, which is currently removing many programs intended to assist homeless people. Instead, the government must support housing-first and preventative programs, as opposed to treatment-first and reactive solutions.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) now states that the Biden administration's practice of renewing 90% of continuum of care projects (CoCs), the largest homelessness program in the country, promoted "entitlement." These are projects attempting to help some of the least entitled people. However, under the new administration, HUD will only renew 30% of CoCs automatically. An executive order recently signed by President Trump requires homeless people to be treated for mental health and addiction issues before gaining access to stable housing, which many experts say could only exacerbate the issue. The executive order states that cities should ban homeless camping, and defunds addiction harm reduction programs such as syringe exchanges under the refuted claim that they increase illegal drug use. These are all false solutions that do nothing to improve the situation.

Instead of cutting funding for the organizations trying to help, we must shift our approach towards housing-first and preventative solutions. A study at UC Berkeley found that providing unhoused people with permanent housing drastically reduced mental health issues and improved long-term general health. It is critical to evaluate the complex societal and socioeconomic factors that cause people to lose housing in the first place. Even if the entire unhoused population was suddenly housed, homelessness will inevitably reoccur without proper prevention. Many teenagers become homeless after familial conflict over addiction or sexual and gender orientation, and other frequent causes of homelessness include substance abuse, mental health issues, lack of affordable housing, underemployment, and discrimination. To remedy this, we should implement government-funded incentive programs for corporations that hire people at risk of losing permanent housing, because having a stable paycheck is the first step towards residential stability.

Instead of providing the American Dream, this country is a failing reality for many. Nonetheless, it may still be possible to prevent further homelessness. Substantial change is required in our education, healthcare, housing, employment, and the public perception of unhoused people. Without drastic reforms, hundreds of thousands of people will continue to live in poverty and without adequate housing. The greater populace cannot remain indifferent, look the other way as people suffer, or fail to recognize our common humanity. We need to work together because we should no longer have to face the world alone. We need to find our way home.

Quinn Sheldon (Lamoille Union High School, Junior)

On average women spend 25% more time in poor health than men. This is due to a significant gap in health research for women. Historically, women's bodies have been under-researched and male bodies were the norm. Although policy changes in the 1990s have helped, more needs to be done to close the gap in women's health research.

Women's health is still under-researched despite more frequent healthcare usage than men. A study done in 2022 by researchers at Harvard Medical School found that despite being 51% of the population, women only represented about 40% of the participants in clinical trials for cancer, cardiovascular disease and psychiatric disorders. This is especially concerning because these are three of the diseases that most affect women. Due to reproductive health, hormonal influences, higher disease burden and longer lifespan women visit healthcare professionals more often than men. The World Economic Forum found that the average working woman in the US spends 18% more on healthcare costs than men every year. Yet, sex-specific research is still lacking.

Men and women have physiological differences that can affect medical care. Biological sex influences physical, physiological, hormonal, metabolic and cellular functions. This means that men and women are likely to experience different outcomes from medicine and medical devices. The information we have about medicine today is mostly based on research on male bodies. Without sex specific research women will be more likely to receive improper health care.

Lack of women's healthcare research results in poorer treatment outcomes for women. A 2020 study from UC Berkeley and the University of Chicago have found that women experience negative effects from medications twice as much as men. The inadequate testing in clinical trials leads to more misdiagnosing and ineffective treatment. This is why the research gap for women's health needs to be addressed.

Clinical trials should be designed with both men and women in mind. Creating targeted policy that can broaden the inclusion of women in clinical trials, and designing more trials with women in mind will greatly benefit in closing the research gap. Then we can have more sex-specific data and be able come up with more effective treatments for women. Together we can close the women's health research gap and create better healthier lives for half of our population.

Andrew Walsh (Essex High School, Junior)

Atmospheric carbon dioxide levels have been rising since the industrial revolution, causing worse natural disasters like floods, blizzards, and fires. Human activity is the leading cause of climate change, and there are many actions we can take to limit its effects. Many actions that reduce carbon emissions, like purchasing sustainable food, clothing, and transportation, come at higher costs than conventional alternatives. For millions of Americans, this added cost is a financial barrier, not just an inconvenience. Sustainable living can't be only accessible to those who can afford it. Until we make sustainability accessible to everyone, the United States won't be able to slow down the effects of climate change.

A 2025 MarketWatch Guides Financial Success Survey showed that 57% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck, meaning more than half the country has little to no financial flexibility. Necessities like food and housing already take up most of these households' income, making sustainable options out of reach. When people are struggling to afford everyday survival, asking them to pay more for sustainable alternatives is unrealistic.

Sustainable products cost more than their conventional alternatives because of sourcing, certifications, and limited demand. On average, sustainable food is 20-30% more expensive than conventional options, electric cars are 15-20% more expensive than gas cars, and fair-trade clothes can cost over three times as much as fast-fashion alternatives. For households already struggling financially, these price differences make sustainable choices inaccessible.

Recent national policy decisions have further increased the burden on low-income households. The 2025 One Big Beautiful Bill Act reduced funding for healthcare and food assistance while subsidizing fossil fuels and reducing clean energy incentives. As a result, households already facing financial and health challenges have even fewer resources to put towards sustainable alternatives. This demonstrates how climate policy that ignores economic inequality can unintentionally exclude millions of Americans. Vermont's Climate Action Plan shows addressing affordability and sustainability together enables progress, but we need a national solution.

I propose a federal bill that subsidizes sustainable goods for households based on income. The program would cover a percentage of the cost for sustainable food, electric vehicles, and ethically sourced clothing, based on household income with the greatest support going to households with the least financial flexibility. Lowering the upfront cost of sustainability would allow people living paycheck to paycheck to participate in climate action without sacrificing their basic needs. Making sustainable choices affordable is essential if climate policy is to include the entire country.

Sustainability cannot be a luxury reserved for the privileged. The United States can create a fairer system that allows all Americans to contribute to fighting climate change by removing financial barriers. Making sustainable living accessible is the only way to limit the effects the United States has on climate change. If we want real progress, we must make sure no one is left behind.