

Poverty Realities in America

The Numbers Far too many people, mostly children, suffer from poverty conditions. More than 15% of the population, 43.2 million Americans, live in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2010). Research shows that it is very difficult for people born into poverty to achieve an education and earn a living wage.

Housing 1 in 4 working households in America (10.6 million families) spend more than half of their pre-tax income on housing. This is a level that experts say is unhealthy, if not impossible, to sustain. There is no community in America where minimum wage earners can reasonably afford to pay rent. In February 2012, the National Low Income Housing Coalition conducted a study that examined the cost of housing across the United States and found that no city had rentals priced low enough where a minimum wage earner could live comfortably. In 86% of counties surveyed, even those who earned twice the minimum wage still did not earn enough money to pay rent and other basic needs.

Welfare Government Assistance falls short of covering basic needs. Many people cling to it because they see no options for earning money for survival with their limited skills, education, and literacy levels. Nationally, the average welfare check for one parent and two children is \$478 per month. Twenty years ago, it was \$408. The national average added for a baby born to a family already on welfare is \$60. The average disability check is \$600. Less than 2% of the federal budget is allocated for welfare.

Food The rates of hunger continue to be extremely high for an industrialized nation. Many people think hunger does not exist because of obesity. The fact is 46 million people suffer food insecurity and one-third of this group experienced chronic hunger. A person on food stamps receives \$3.00 per day. Healthy food is expensive.

Working Hard Many people work hard and are still not making it. There is a dominant belief in our society that if one works hard enough they will do well. According to the recent census, two-thirds of people living in poverty are working 1.7 jobs.

Education Youth living in poverty are the least likely to become educated in our nation. Some schools struggle to address the needs of people in poverty and help them to succeed. Academic achievement numbers are low for the children of families who struggle to meet their basic needs. People living in poverty often experience education as "stress" and see it as a place they do not belong. A college education appears to be the only possibility to help people break the walls of poverty and escape its hardships; yet today, it is less likely a person in poverty will attain a college education than it was in the 1940's.

Effects of Poverty People in poverty often have internalized their poverty as a personal deficiency. They see no hope for anything but an insufficient welfare or disability check, or underground activities that barely pay enough to keep food on the table and often result in incarceration. Nearly 80 percent of people in prison cannot read at an 8th grade level. Poverty affects education success, health, relationships, and most of all it affects the ability for humans to develop to their full potential.

We can do better A deeper understanding of poverty and the barriers it presents is highly needed. It requires community members and professionals being consistent in saying, "Poverty is an issue we are going to address." It requires each and every one of us exploring what is in our hands to make a difference for those living in poverty. Who do we know that might be able to assist us in breaking barriers to moving out of poverty?

Educating Students Who Live In Poverty



Thank you for choosing a profession where you have opportunities to change lives. Your role in assisting students to discover their talents, interests, resources and opportunities for gaining an education is critical. The Poverty Training by Dr. Donna M. Beegle, will provide you with a foundation and strategies for assisting your students from poverty to become educated. This handout serves as a take away for you to revisit concepts covered in the training and deepen your learning.

The stereotypes of people living in poverty in America are so deeply imbedded in our society that one of the most difficult parts of this training may be to examine your beliefs and open your mind to new interpretations of the behavior of those struggling without basic needs. Doing so, however, is the first step to improving your success and effectiveness with educating students in poverty and helping end the cycle of suffering. Your attitudes and beliefs shapes your tone of voice, your body posture, your facial expressions and your actions towards students.

Questions to reflect on during and after this training:

- What do you believe causes poverty?
- Where do your beliefs come from? Were they passed down from your parents? Did you learn them from your community? Do you have your own experience with poverty, etc.?
- How are your experiences and exposure to opportunities, while growing up, different than the students and families you serve?
- Are you armed with relevant facts about poverty?
- Are you able to suspend judgement and understand people are making the best decisions possible from their perspective?
- Are you willing to assist students and families who may believe and respond differently than you?

The Gap: Poverty has different meanings in America

What students living in poverty learn

Students and their families living in the crisis of poverty receive messages from our culture that they do not belong and something is wrong with them. Here are some of the messages taught to students and their families experiencing generational, working-class poverty, and immigrant poverty:

- No one cares.
- Everyone seems smarter.
- People who are making it must be better than me.
- We don't belong anywhere.
- People like us do not get educated.
- We don't have what we need to break out of poverty.
- There is no one to help.



What most of America is taught about poverty

Think about where you get your information on poverty? If you are like most people, it is from television and newspapers. The number one teacher about poverty in America is the media! However, the media tend to present extremes, sensationalize and dramatize stories. Facts about the real causes and solutions to poverty are rarely presented and therefore most people remain unaware of poverty, even in their own communities.

Even college educated professionals operate on false knowledge of poverty. Universities graduate people from college to become teachers, counselors, lawyers, judges, researchers, politicians and other professionals without Poverty 101. Few Americans have had the course, "The History of Poverty in the United States of America." We, as a country, do not know our history. We do not know models we have used to address poverty and we do not know how we have come to our current understanding of poverty.

For many generations, the ignorance on poverty has promoted stereotypes and leaves people with little or no real understanding of poverty or its impacts on people. Programs, policies and procedures for helping poor people are created by those who do not fully understand what people in poverty need to move forward, and as a result, the programs, policies and procedures often punish or fail.

What you can do

- **Operate like NASA - failure is not an option.** If you cannot connect people or resolve a poverty issue, who in your network or community might be able to? Use an "If not me, then who?" approach.
- **Build stronger partnerships.** Poverty is complex and requires a comprehensive community-wide approach. Connect with other businesses, organizations, and individuals in the neighborhood who can help. Rely on your "full resource backpack," an inventory of who in your community may be able to assist people in moving out of poverty.
- **Learn proven strategies.** In spite of the lack of education in our country about poverty, there are theories that provide strategies for breaking the iron cage of poverty. The following page outlines five theories and provide suggestions for how educators and others can break the barriers of poverty.
- **Mentor.** Take the time to build meaningful relationship with students (strategies provided on page 6).

The Meaning of Poverty

What We Learn is Based on Life Experiences

The word "poverty" is used to describe many different life situations. Some students may be from generational poverty, others may be experiencing working-class poverty. Each of these life experiences shape expectations, knowledge, confidence and opportunities for gaining an education.

Below are some characteristics of different life experiences labeled "Poverty."

Generational Poverty

- Family has never owned land
- Never knew anyone who benefited from education
- Never knew anyone who moved up or was respected in a job
- Highly mobile
- High family illiteracy
- Focus is on making it through the day

Working-Class Poverty

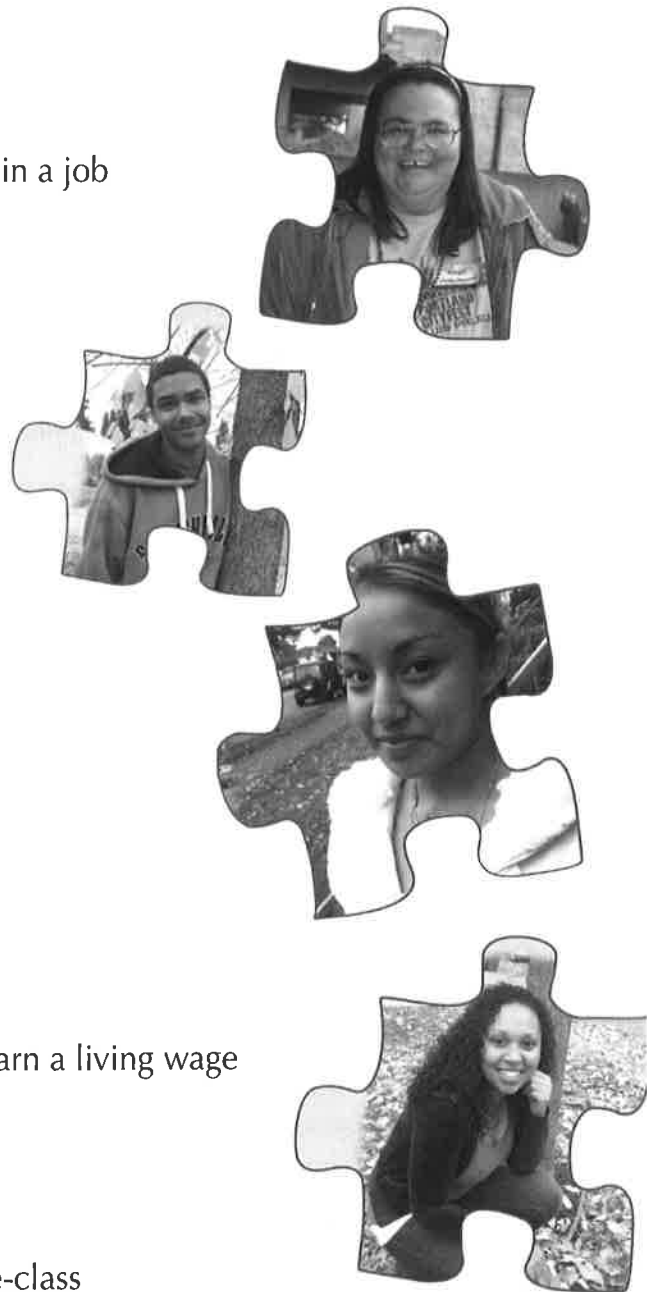
- Working, but rarely have money for any extras
- Most do not own property
- Live pay check to pay check
- Few have health care
- Focus on making it two weeks or through the month
- Poverty seen as personal deficiency

Immigrant Poverty

- Have little or no resources
- Face language and culture barriers
- Seem to do have a stronger sense of self and often do better than those born into poverty in America
- Poverty is viewed as a system problem

Situational Poverty

- Surrounded by people who are educated or able to earn a living wage
- Attends school regularly and has health care
- Has crisis (health, divorce, etc.) and income drops
- Generally is able to make it back to middle-class
- Has not internalized the poverty as personal problem
- Does not recognize advantages of growing up middle-class
- Can be harsh judge of those in poverty



Build Relationships That Matter: Mentor

Mentoring, the relationship between an adult and child that positively influences a young person, is the single most important action educators can take. It does not matter if the mentoring is through an organized program in which you are matched to a mentee, or if a relationship develops naturally through daily interactions at school, but what does matter is the characteristics of the mentor. Research on people who grew up in poverty and made it to a bachelor's degree showed they all had mentors, and the mentors had common characteristics (See *Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College* by Levine and Nidiffer, (1996) & *See Poverty: Be the Difference* by Dr. Donna M. Beegle). Below are the characteristic and strategies of effective mentors:

Believe in the student's ability to get out of poverty.

- Tell your mentee many times, in many ways, you believe in them, you know they are smart, can learn more, graduate from high school and be successful afterwards. If you do not believe in them, they probably will not believe in them self either.
- Find ways to help your mentee understand that what they currently know is not all they can know. Explain that people are not "born with a high or low IQ," that the IQ test assumes the test-taker has been taught the concepts. People cannot know something they have never been exposed to.

Believe the student has strengths and talents.

- Practice a strengths-based approach every day; look for what is good and right about the student.
- Build on the student's current knowledge and skills. Suggest classes or activities to get involved with (yearbook, drama, photography, etc.), and after school opportunities (sports, clubs, etc.). When you suggest activities, tell them you think they would be great at it.
- Walk your mentee through the steps of signing up for activities, asking and applying for scholarships, and finding resources needed to participate and succeed. Set them up for success!

Know the benefits of connecting mentees to others who are educated.

- Introduce your mentee to a network of people who have benefitted from education or who have moved up in a job.
- Assist the students from poverty in understanding that people who are educated are not "better," they are just people who have had different experiences and opportunities.
- Help the student feel a sense of "belonging" among new environments and new people: provide needed supplies to participate, attend with them the first time; and before arriving, talk about expected rules, procedures, etiquette, etc.

Know that assets are critical to success and how to build them.

- Understand that students need supports to succeed and that no one does everything by them self.
- Visit the Search Institute and download "The 40 Developmental Assets." Use the list to assess your mentee's internal/external assets.
- Give information, examples, and supports to build internal (self-confidence, hope) and external capacity (supplies, knowledge, transportation, etc.) for moving out and staying out of poverty.

Know how to navigate middle-class systems, procedures, and paperwork.

- Help connect your mentee and their family to resources needed and to those who can help.
- Assist with filling out paper work, applications for services or programs, etc.
- Teach students to advocate for themselves. Show them how to find resources and ask the right questions.



Strategies to Break Poverty Barriers

Below are five research-based theories on helping people move out of poverty and the correlating best practices for educating students and connecting with families.

Theory	Best Practices
<p>1. Strengths Perspective Approach: Every individual has strengths. You can empower students and families by focusing on what is good about them, what they do know and what skills they have now.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for the strengths and skills of students and families. Tell them what you believe is good about them. • Stand in awe of people fighting poverty. • Ask students and families for their help. Find ways they can contribute, feel helpful and be included. • Give students and families opportunities to shine. • Tell people you are happy to see them; make them feel wanted and valued. • Practice showing empathy instead of sympathy (no one likes people to feel sorry for them).
<p>2. Resiliency Theory: People can develop resiliency when they are surrounded by others who tell them what is good about them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat people special. Show people what is unique about them. This builds resiliency. • Practice seeing strengths using the strategies listed above.
<p>3. Asset Theory: The more assets a student has, both internal (conflict resolution skills, sense of purpose, etc.) and external (adult relationships, caring school climate, etc.), the more likely they will succeed. The Search Institute has identified 40 developmental assets for youth. To download, go to: www.search-institute.org/developmental-assets.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn what assets your students and families have and what services or opportunities they need to move forward. Connect them to resources. • Build partnerships in your community so you know where to find resources. • Help people navigate the middle-class world such as paperwork, asking the right questions, taking steps, etc.
<p>4. Social Capital Theory: People increase their chances for success when they know the right people and have meaningful connections with those who can help. People in poverty greatly benefit from having trusting relationships with people who have benefitted from education.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce people to others who have benefitted from education. • Tell people about opportunities (programs, events, etc.) that you know will put them in a place to build relationships with people who are educated. • Make connections face-to-face, instead of giving phone numbers or a "list" of people/agencies to call. • Give people address books and your contact info!
<p>5. Faulty Attribution Theory: When we attribute motives to someone else's behavior without discovering the "why" behind their actions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withhold judgement of behavior. • Tell yourself people are doing the best they can with the information and perspectives they possess. • Remind yourself that your experiences and world-view may be different from those you serve. • Attempt to find out the "why" behind behavior.