

Poverty in america: a global epidemic

[Sociology](#), [Social Issues](#)



A Global Epidemic Ben Sims Sociology 445: Contemporary Social Problems
Professor Shannon Sellers August 2, 2014 Of all the social problems that exist within America today, poverty is undoubtedly the most prevalent. The stigma of poverty is no longer solely the plight of third world countries, but rather an epidemic that has vigorously manifested itself in the United States at an alarming rate. Yes, in America, the country teeming with an abundance of natural resources and the patents to the most pioneering technological advances of modern time, indisputably faces an unprecedented burden of poverty.

It is estimated that more than 46 million Americans live in poverty in the US (Tighten 157). American families are increasingly finding themselves struggling to make ends meet, and with the continuing rate of unemployment and the rapid increases to the cost of living more and more families are left to choose between the very basic necessities of life such as food, shelter and healthcare. Poverty has also had a profound impact on education and crime, predominantly in inner-city communities where the wealth inequality is most apparent.

With all the carnage caused by poverty being distinctly obvious in America why is nothing being done about it? Does anyone care? Sadly, the most egregious aspect of the epidemic of poverty in America is that it doesn't have to exist at all. The US ultimately has the resources and means to eliminate poverty altogether, if only it was placed as a high enough priority. To truly comprehend the profound impact that poverty has had on America, there must first be an understanding of what poverty essentially means and how it was caused.

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Webster dictionary describes poverty as " the state of one who lacks a usual (Webster's Dictionary). The textbook however, offers a more in-depth perspective on the term stating that poverty is " a standard of living below the minimum needed for the maintenance of adequate diet, health and shelter" (Tighten 181). This definition implies that the poverty threshold is based on those who can make the minimum amount of money required to maintain a decent level of life and those who cannot. Although these particular descriptions of poverty are not necessarily wrong, they are also not entirely accurate.

When most people think of poverty the assumption may be that the core percentage of those actually living in poverty are the homeless or unemployed, but relative to popular belief most of the people living in poverty actually work. They are classified as the working poor. According to US Census data over 2.6 million full-time workers lived below the poverty line in 2010 (Tighten 161). How is this possible? First and foremost, the federal minimum wage requirement in the United States is \$7.25. So for an employee who works 40 hours a week their total monthly salary would be \$1,165.00 before taxes. Now let's analyze how much it would cost for an average American earning a minimum wage salary to pay for the 3 most basic necessities in life: food, shelter and health care. The average percentage that Americans pay in housing costs is approximately 28 to 35 percent of their take home pay (Curmudgeon, 2010). 28 percent of \$1,160.00 is \$324.80. According to 2010 survey conducted by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics Americans spend roughly \$151.00 a week on food, equaling a whopping \$604.00 a month (Mended, 2012).

If we add the average monthly cost of healthcare under Beam's Affordable Care Act, which is \$328.00 (Persuade, 2014), the total monthly expenses for just the basic necessities alone is a staggering \$1,256.00. The basic necessities alone total more than the average worker, earning minimum wage, in America makes in a month and that figure still doesn't account for utility bills, transportation and other miscellaneous expenses. Not to mention the addition of a spouse or children. It is important to understand that poverty is a very complex social dilemma, with a variety of unfounded stereotypes that persist about its causes.

One of the most common misconceptions about poverty is that the poor inherently cause their own poverty, alluding to the poor having a lack of drive and ambition necessary to change their financial status. This perception is often referred to as the person-blame approach. This means that social problems such as poverty are the result of the pathologies of individuals (Tighten 163). Although this notion is credible, in this particular instance, it is slightly off-kilter due to that fact that even though 2. Million people go to work and log over 40 hours a week they still won't surpass the threshold of even half of the nation's median salary. And therein lies the problem. The issue is not whether members of society are willing to work, because not only are a majority of the poor willing and able to work hard, they do so when given the opportunity. The real root of the problem is the minimum wage requirement in the US and the lack of access to adequate education and training necessary to acquire better-paying jobs.

The system-blame approach is more fitting in this instance because there is no shortage of people willing to work but rather a shortage in the amount that is being paid out for said work. There is also no shortage in people willing to procure and utilize the sufficient training and education needed to attain better employment but underprivileged. Although the government has in fact tried to implement programs to solve the problem of poverty in America, many of these programs contained crucial flaws and in many cases made the predicament worse. Welfare is the most notable of these programs.

Welfare was established to assist underprivileged families and individuals get out of poverty (Tighten 165), but have ultimately led to a disturbing rate of dependency. Instead of assisting families welfare had essentially enabled them in many ways, with a vast majority of recipients not feeling the need to work. Provisions thin the program even made it easier to stay on welfare than to seek employment and encouraged unmarried woman to have children. Thus, the enactment of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. This bill was established to reduce the number of families and individuals dependent on government assistance.

These institutional changes helped to reduce welfare dependency by mandating that recipients actively seek work while receiving government assistance, increasing the level of accountability for those in need of financial aid. The government also developed several other programs in an effort to curve poverty such as the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANK) which provides financial assistance to low-income families but also

requires them to work at least 20 hours a week to receive benefits (Saddler, 2012).

Addition services such as Medicaid, Food Stamps and WICK were all established to essentially assist low-income families achieve financial stability while progressively becoming independent of all government aid. Although these programs and institutional amendments have been extremely valuable in assisting the poor and underprivileged maintain a sustainable level of life, unfortunately they haven't been enough to end or even cut the poverty level in Alfa.

These programs have ultimately helped sustain the global threshold of poverty in many ways by serving to only assist low-income families get through financial difficulties instead of helping them get out. The only way for members of the underprivileged society to rise above poverty is to provide the means to earn more than the nation's median income. This goes back to the need for programs that assist individuals in acquiring the knowledge and training necessary to acquire higher paying jobs and also for the government to raise the minimum wage requirement.

Perhaps the most compelling explanation for the persistence of poverty is the remarry of private profit. The basic principle of capitalism is - who gets what is determined solely by private profit rather than collective need (Tighten 173). By private corporations emphasizing the theory of maximizing profits they ultimately end up endorsing poverty. This is done by companies paying their workers the minimum amount possible including benefits and

pocketing the wealth that was created by laborers and distributing it among the owners instead of the working class.

Primacy of profit also endorses poverty by employing a bevy of uneducated and desperate laborers who are eager to work for low wages. Many of these laborers are illegal immigrants and don't view having benefits as a necessity. This in turn makes it extremely profitable for owners of businesses and large corporations to hire these workers because of the amount of money that they will be able to save while still being able to employ laborers full time.

Poverty is supported and maintained through my belief that the US government has made attempts to curb the impact of poverty, I believe that the United States has the power to end poverty all together. This can be accomplished by making poverty a top priority. The United States spends roughly 712. Billion dollars of our nation's defense each year (Tighten 177). A percentage of that figure can be deducted and contributed to combat poverty without Jeopardizing our nations' defense at all.

This extra money could be used to provide adequate schooling and fund programs that promote academic advancement in inner-city communities. Those funds could also be used to provide training seminars for individuals with limited education who seek higher paying Jobs and wish to be more competitive candidates in today's Job market. Most importantly however, those funds could be used to raise the federal minimum wage requirement to a level that allows ore people to earn above or at least earn wages comparable to the nation's median salary.