



Connecting People

Communication
Across Barriers

Breaking the Iron Cage: Helping People in Poverty Move Forward

Thank you for choosing a profession where you have opportunities to change lives. Your role in assisting people with moving out of poverty is an honorable choice. Maybe you are already a hero to many people moving forward, or perhaps working with people in poverty is a new challenge for you. Either way, this training is designed to provide you with a foundation for understanding what it means to live in poverty in the United States and strategies to help people break through the “iron cage” and move forward. This Learning Guide serves as a take-away for you to revisit concepts covered in the training. For more in-depth learning, please refer to **See Poverty...Be the Difference** by Dr. Donna Beegle.



Stereotypes of people living in poverty in America are deeply embedded in our society. Before our country can move forward with fighting the war on poverty, we must make a collective effort to examine personal beliefs and open our minds to new interpretations of the behavior of those struggling without basic needs. Attitudes and beliefs shape tone of voice, body posture, facial expressions and actions toward others. If you are judging behavior, then you cannot connect. Therefore, it is important to reflect on beliefs.

Questions to reflect on:

- What do you believe causes poverty?
- Where do your beliefs come from? (For example, your parents, environment, community, media, personal experience, etc?)
- How are your experiences and exposure to opportunities, while growing up, different than the people struggling in poverty that you serve?
- Are you armed with the facts about poverty in your community?
- Are you able to suspend judgement and believe that people are making the best decisions possible from their perspective?
- Are you willing to assist people who may believe and respond differently than you?

In this Learning Guide

- Poverty Realities in America
- Types of Poverty
- The Meaning of Poverty
- Strategies to Break Poverty Barriers
- Building Relationships; Navigating

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 (U.S. 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 experiences 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. Many students living in poverty have low academic achievements and schools struggle to address their needs. Families living in poverty often experience education as “stress” and see it as a place where they do not belong. A college education can help people break the barriers 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 Many people in poverty 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 educational 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 urgently 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 to explore what is in our hands to make a difference for those living in poverty. Whom do you know that might be able to assist us in breaking barriers to moving out of poverty?

Types of Poverty

What We Learn is Based on Life Experiences

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

Below are some characteristics of different life experiences labeled “Poverty.”

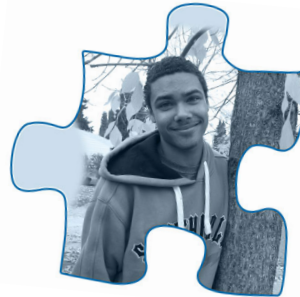
Generational Poverty

- Workers of the land, as opposed to owners of the land
- Never knew anyone who benefited from education
- Never knew anyone who moved up or was respected in a job
- Highly mobile, move frequently looking for work
- High family illiteracy
- Focus is on making it through the day



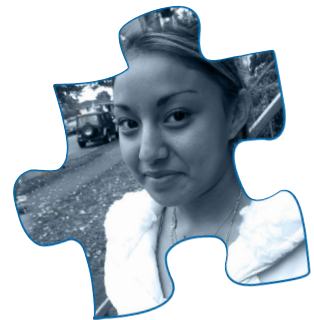
Working-Class Poverty

- Working, but barely able to pay for basic needs (no money for any extras)
- Renters as opposed to home owners
- 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



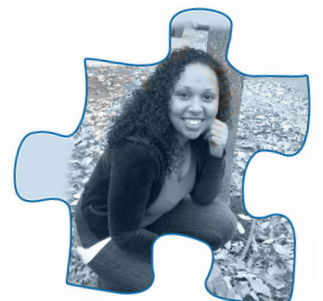
Immigrant Poverty

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



Situational Poverty

- Grows up in stable environment with basic needs met and more
- Attends school regularly, has health care, family vacations, etc.
- Surrounded by educated people with living wage jobs
- As adult, has crisis (health, divorce, etc.) and income drops
- Generally able to make it back to middle-class
- Has not internalized poverty as personal deficiency
- Does not recognize advantages of growing up middle-class
- Can be harsh judge of those in poverty

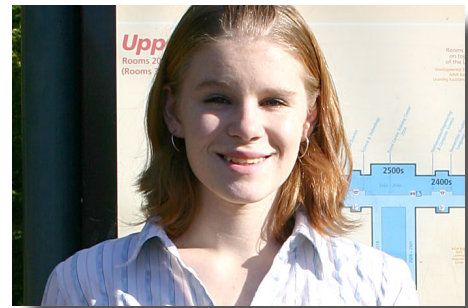


The Meaning of Poverty in America

What people living in poverty learn

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 people of all ages experiencing generational, working-class, and immigrant poverty:

- No one cares.
- Everyone else seems smarter.
- People who are making it must be better than I am.
- We don't belong anywhere.
- People like us do not get educated.
- The purpose of education is unclear.
- 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 others, 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. Most people remain unaware of poverty, even in their own communities.

Not only is the general public unaware of the real facts about poverty, but many educated professionals also are unaware. 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." We, as a country, do not know our history. We do not know models used to address poverty or how we have come to our current understanding of poverty.

The implications of an uneducated America on poverty is devastating. It fosters stereotypes with the general public and creates leaders and decision makers who have little or no real understanding of poverty or its impacts on people. Well-intended leaders create programs, policies and procedures that are not working to move people out of poverty and, instead, are punishing them and exacerbating poverty in America.

What you can do

- **Gain a deeper understanding.** In spite of the lack of education in our country about poverty, there are research-based strategies for helping people break through the "iron cage" of poverty. The following page summarizes five theories and provides strategies you can apply in helping people move forward.
- **Operate like NASA: Failure is not an option.** If you cannot connect with people or resolve a poverty issue, whom in your network or community might be able to? Use an "If not me, then who?" approach.
- **Collaborate and strengthen partnerships.** Poverty is complex and requires a comprehensive, community-wide approach. Connect with other people, businesses, and organizations in your neighborhood who can help. Create a "full resource backpack," an inventory of who in your community may be able to assist people in moving out of poverty.

Strategies to Break Poverty Barriers

Below are five research-based theories on helping people move out of poverty. For each theory, we have provided practical strategies you can start using right away with the people you work with.

Theory	Navigating/Mentoring Practices
<p>1. Strengths Perspective Approach: Every individual has strengths. You can empower people 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"> • Stand in awe of those fighting poverty. Look for strengths and skills. Believe everyone has knowledge and skills. • Tell people what you believe is good about them. • Find ways for people to shine. Learn about their skills and ask them to contribute. Help them feel included and needed. • Tell people you are happy to see them (even when they are late or have not met a deadline); help them feel wanted and valued. • Practice showing empathy instead of sympathy (no one likes people to feel sorry for them).
<p>2. Resiliency Theory: Resiliency is the ability to cope and continue functioning, despite experiencing stress and adversity. It is not a personal trait. Professionals can help people develop resiliency by focusing on what is good about the person.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat people as if they are special. Share what is unique about them. • Practice a “strengths-based approach” when communicating with people in poverty using the strategies listed above.
<p>3. Asset Theory: The more assets a person has, both internal (conflict resolution skills, sense of purpose, etc.) and external (housing, transportation, etc.), the more likely it is they will succeed. For youth, the Search Institute has identified 40 developmental assets that help enhance success. To download, go to www.search-institute.org/developmental-assets.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn what assets a person has and what services or opportunities are needed; connect them to those resources. • Build partnerships in your community so you know where to find resources. • Help people navigate the middle-class world. Make phone calls; offer to fill out paperwork; explain complex information in simple terms. • Teach people how to advocate for themselves. Tell them what questions to ask, explain how systems work, suggest programs or services you know will help.
<p>4. Social Capital Theory: No one does everything by himself or herself. Those who are successful have connections with others who support them in various ways. People in poverty need the same kind of support; they need meaningful relationships with others who are educated and have resources to support them.</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. • Help people obtain all the tools, resources and knowledge they need to feel like they “belong” in the environment and with the people you are connecting them with (clothes, materials, knowledge of etiquette, etc). • 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 judgment of behavior. • Tell yourself people are doing the best they can with the information and perspectives they possess. • Remind yourself that your experiences and worldview may be different from those you serve. • Attempt to find out the “why” behind behavior.

For more in-depth learning, refer to the book, *See Poverty...Be the Difference* by Dr. Donna Beegle.



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Building Relationships & Navigating

Building a relationship with a person living in poverty can be the most impactful strategy for helping them move forward. Research on people who grew up in poverty and later became successful shows that most of them had people in their lives who helped them “Navigate” the middle class world (*See Poverty...Be the Difference* by Dr. Donna M. Beegle, 2000 and *Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College* by Levine and Nidiffer, 1996). Moving out of poverty is not due to being “born smarter” or simply “trying harder” than others, as the Hollywood rags-to-riches movies would like you to believe. People in poverty move up when they develop meaningful, supportive relationships with professionals who help them feel like they belong to navigate resources and opportunities needed to succeed. Below are characteristics and strategies of effective Navigators.

Believe in the person’s ability to get out of poverty.

- Tell people many times, in many ways that you believe in them, think they are smart, and have skills and talents and can learn more.
- Find ways to help them understand that what they currently know is not all they can know.

Believe the person has strengths and talents.

- Practice a strengths-based approach; look for what is good and right about people.
- Build on their current knowledge and skills. Suggest programs, classes or activities that can help them move forward. When you suggest activities, tell them you think they would be great at it.
- Set people up for success. Make sure they have all the resources needed (transportation, clothes, etiquette, etc.) to participate in the programs you suggest.

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

- Introduce people to others who have benefitted from education or who have moved up in a job.
- Help people in poverty understand that those who are educated are not “better,” they just have had different experiences and opportunities.
- Help people feel a sense of “belonging” among new environments and new people.

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

- Understand that people need supports to succeed; no one does everything alone.
- Give information, examples, and supports to build internal (self-confidence, hope) and external capacity (supplies, knowledge, transportation, etc.).
- For youth, visit the Search Institute online and download “The 40 Developmental Assets.”

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

- Help find and connect people to resources needed and to those who can help.
- Assist with filling out paperwork, applications for services or programs, etc.
- Teach people how to advocate for themselves (find resources, ask questions, etc).

