

Module

2

Have you or someone you know experienced poverty?

This may be a very difficult question to engage with. Therefore, it's important to explore why such a discussion is so difficult. One reason, in our opinion, is the overall perception of poverty that is held by the general public. Survey research has shown that much of the population tends to explain the existence of poverty as a result of individual failure and blame.

Blame and Stigma

The argument goes something like this. America is a land of plentiful opportunities, with those opportunities available to all. So long as one works hard, he or she should be able to accomplish much in a lifetime. In addition, by working hard and applying oneself, anyone wanting to avoid poverty can do so. Therefore, for those who find themselves impoverished, they have no one but themselves to blame. From this perspective, poverty results from laziness, making poor decisions, counterproductive attitudes, lack of skills, and so on.

Now ask yourself or pose to your group, "Are you aware of this perspective?" "Is this one of the reasons why discussing your personal experiences with poverty (if you have them) might be so troubling?" "Does it feel like failure if you've encountered economic distress?" If you answered, yes, you're not alone. We would argue that these attitudes are precisely one of the reasons why addressing poverty in the United States is so difficult.

It turns out that there is considerable stigma and disgrace surrounding the poverty stricken. Sociological research has shown that when a group is stigmatized, the general public often disassociates itself from that group. The result is that no one claims any allegiance to the stigmatized group, allowing the prevailing viewpoint to continue unchallenged.

The Role of the Calculator

We would argue that the poverty risk calculator helps to confront this perspective. As you explore the different sets of probabilities, you will discover that for many different population groups (but certainly not all) the odds of experiencing poverty in the future are far from trivial. This can be a powerful source of information. It allows one to recognize that they are not alone.

A pertinent quote that touches upon this is from Aston Applewhite who writes, "We need something like the women's movement, which made people aware that things they thought were their own personal problems—like being perceived as incompetent or being paid less—actually were widely shared political problems that required collective action."

Such is the case with poverty. Too often we fall into the trap of framing a social problem as being solely within the purview of the individual. Yet as discussed in other modules, poverty is largely about the loss of jobs, health emergencies, inadequate schools, low wages, and many, many more societal and economic factors. It turns out that collective action is necessary in order to deal with these broader forces.

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Another on-point quote, this time from the sociologist C. Wright Mills, describes unemployment,

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employed, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.

Returning back to the topic of personal experience with poverty, it may be important to reflect on the circumstances which have led to poverty. To what extent were these circumstances under your control? In your group discussion, try delving into the subject of how much control we're actually able to exert over the course of our lives. To what extent do luck and chance effect life outcomes? In our *Chasing the American Dream* book we devote a chapter to the twists of fate that can profoundly shape the direction of one's life.

Furthermore, can you imagine falling into poverty in the future? What might be some of the circumstances and conditions that could throw you into poverty? How likely do you think it is that these might occur? These are important questions to ask yourself and/or to pose within your group. ★