

Module

3

What are the realities versus the myths of poverty?

Having discussed and given some thought to the attitudes and stigma that often surrounds the impoverished (in Module 2), what are some of the additional myths and realities of American poverty? Much of our research has addressed these myths. In fact, few topics in America have more myths and stereotypes surrounding them than that of poverty. From the current wave of political rhetoric to your average Joe or Jane on the street, American poverty has been heavily laden with misconceptions. These include the notion that poverty affects a relatively small number of Americans, that the poor are impoverished for years at a time, that most of those in poverty live in inner cities, that too much welfare assistance is provided, and that poverty is ultimately the result of not working hard enough. Although pervasive, each assumption is flat out wrong.

Poverty is Widespread

First, the percentage of the population who directly encounter poverty is exceedingly high. For example, our earlier work has found that nearly 60 percent of Americans between the ages of 20 and 75 will encounter at least one year below the poverty line. In our *Chasing the American Dream* book we found that if we combine welfare use, near poverty, and unemployment, four out of five Americans between 25 and 60 will encounter one or more of these events. In addition, one half of all American children will at some point during their childhood reside in a household that uses food stamps for a period of time.

Contrary to popular opinion, poverty is a mainstream event experienced by the majority of Americans. For most of us, the question is not if we will experience poverty, but rather when we will encounter poverty.

Time Spent in Poverty is Relatively Short

Although poverty strikes a majority of the population, the length of time in poverty is relatively short. The standard image of the poor has been that of an entrenched underclass who are impoverished for years at a time. While this captures a small and important slice of poverty, it is also a highly misleading picture of the more widespread and dynamic nature of American poverty. The typical pattern is that individuals experience poverty for a year or two, get above the poverty line for an extended period of time, and then perhaps encounter another spell at some later point. Events such as losing a job, having work hours cut back, families splitting up, or developing a serious medical problem all have the potential to throw households into poverty. The condition of poverty is one in which many Americans will move in and out of at least several times during their lives.

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Poverty is Widely Dispersed

Just as poverty is widely dispersed with respect to time, it is also widely dispersed with respect to place. Only approximately 10 percent of those in poverty live in extremely poor urban neighborhoods. Households in poverty can be found throughout a variety of urban and suburban landscapes, as well as in small towns and communities across rural America. This dispersion of poverty has been increasing over the past 20 years, particularly within suburban areas.

Along with the image of inner city poverty, there is also a widespread perception that most individuals in poverty are nonwhite. According to the latest Census Bureau numbers, two thirds of those below the poverty line identified themselves as white. This percentage has held steady over the past several decades. Nevertheless, it is also quite true that if you are nonwhite, your risk of poverty is much higher than that for whites.

Welfare Assistance is Minimal

What about the generous assistance we provide to the poor? Contrary to political rhetoric, the American social safety net is extremely weak and filled with gaping holes. Furthermore, it has become even weaker over the past 40 years due to various welfare reform and budget cutting measures. We currently expend among the fewest resources within the industrialized countries in terms of pulling families out of poverty and protecting them from falling into poverty. In addition, the U.S. is one of the few developed nations that does not provide universal health care, affordable child care, or reasonably priced low income housing.

The result is a poverty rate approximately twice that of the European average. Whether we examine children's rates of poverty, poverty among working age adults, poverty within single parent families, or overall rates of poverty, the story is much the same—the United States has exceedingly high levels of impoverishment. For the many who find themselves in poverty, they are often shocked at how little assistance the government actually provides to help them through tough times.

Mainstream Beliefs

Finally, as we discussed in Module 2, the most common explanation for poverty has emphasized a lack of motivation, the failure to work hard enough, and poor decision-making in life. Yet research has consistently found that the behaviors and attitudes of those in poverty basically mirror mainstream America. Likewise, the vast majority of the poor have worked extensively in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

These then are some of the more prominent myths and realities of American poverty. Can you think of other myths and stereotypes that surround the issue of poverty? What about the emotionally charged issue of welfare and welfare recipients? Discuss in your group to what extent these stereotypes are based in empirical fact. Why do they continue to persist?

In conclusion, rather than individual shortcomings, poverty is ultimately the result of failings at the economic and political levels. This suggests that the solutions to poverty are to be found in what is important for the health of any family—having a job that pays a decent wage, having the support of good health care and child care, and having access to a first rate education. Yet these policies will only become a reality when we begin to truly understand that poverty is an issue of us, rather than an issue of them. ★