

Module

7

How important is hard work for avoiding poverty?

The phrase, “Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” is one that is embedded in the American lexicon. As we have discussed in earlier modules, this is often the predominant mind set when it comes to explaining poverty. There is a widespread belief that with hard work and effort, anyone can avoid falling into poverty. In your group, ask yourselves, to what extent do you feel that hard work is sufficient for achieving economic success?

The Role of Motivation and Hard Work

In our research, we have given considerable thought to the role that motivation and hard work plays in getting ahead. In the course of writing *Chasing the American Dream*, we talked with dozens of people from many walks of life around this topic. Our overall conclusion is that hard work is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for getting ahead. In other words, hard work and effort are generally important ingredients for reaching one’s goals in life, but they do not guarantee success in and of themselves.

We can think about this relationship in the following way. It is difficult to imagine individuals doing well in life without a decent amount of effort and work. Even for those born into wealth, hard work and motivation are generally required for reaching one’s goals. And for those starting with much less, hard work and initiative would appear to be essential.

On the other hand, we have talked with many people who have worked very hard throughout their adult lives, but have struggled to achieve economic success. During the course of a year, we interviewed women and men who have worked extremely hard but nevertheless found themselves in poverty or close to poverty.

A Hard Working Example

We asked one such woman who was interviewed for our *Chasing the American Dream* book about how the general notion of the American Dream stacked up against the economic realities that she had seen.

I think for most people it’s sort of a Horatio Alger’s thing of going from rags to riches. That anybody through their own hard work can pull themselves up in this country. But I think a whole lot of people have worked really hard and not been able to pull themselves up.

My dad worked really, really hard. And the only reason he had \$10,000 in the bank when he died is because his brother died and left him some. And then his house sold for a little over \$20,000. And this is from a guy who worked his tail off his whole life long. He had paid employment until after age 80 despite his physical disabilities. So, hard work doesn’t necessarily get you ahead. I know that.

We then asked her, “How does this experience affect your sense of fairness?”

Well it makes me mad that things are not fair and that we don’t value hard work. And, in fact, one of the surest indicators for how hard you’ll have to work is your income. The people with lower incomes will have to work harder from a standpoint of backbreaking physical labor.

You know, I make a lot more money than Elaine Nelson from my church. But she mops floors down at St. Peters Hospital and changes sheets and makes sure that the operating room is sanitary so that people can go home without a staph infection. Her work is really essential, but she's only making like \$9 or \$10 an hour to do that kind of work. And I take her to places to get help with her utilities and take her to the food pantry at my church now and then 'cause she doesn't have a car. And she's faced an eviction so many times since I've known her.

And to me, that's just so unfair that a person that does really important work that cares for our community... You know, having a safe, clean hospital is a very important thing. Why don't we reward that adequately? It makes me really mad.

Hard Work May Not Be Enough

What this woman and many like her discussed in our interviews relates to the fact that there are simply not enough decent-paying jobs to support all Americans. In an earlier module (Module 6) we relied on the analogy of musical chairs to illustrate the mismatch between the number of individuals in need of a decent paying job versus the limited number and availability of such jobs. The result is that for some Americans, no matter how hard they work, they still may not be able to get ahead economically.

Do you agree that hard work is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for getting ahead? Can you point to examples of people you know that would confirm this? Are there cases where hard work may not be important in getting ahead? How is this accomplished? Overall, how important is motivation and determination in avoiding poverty? These are some of the questions that are important to consider. ★