

Module

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Why is it important to reduce poverty?

This is a vital question to address, and one that is often ignored. Obviously poverty exacts a heavy toll upon those who fall within its grasp. For example, one of the most consistent findings in epidemiology is that the quality of an individual's health is negatively affected by lower socioeconomic status, particularly impoverishment. Poverty is associated with a host of health risks, including elevated rates of heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, infant mortality, mental illness, undernutrition, lead poisoning, asthma, and dental problems.

Shorter Life Expectancy

The result is a death rate for the poverty-stricken between the ages of 25 and 64 that is approximately three times higher than that for the affluent within the same age range, and a life expectancy that is considerably shorter. For example, Americans in the top 5 percent of the income distribution can expect to live approximately 9 years longer than those in the bottom 10 percent. As health expert Nancy Leidenfrost writes in her review of the literature, "Health disparities between the poor and those with higher incomes are almost universal for all dimensions of health."

However, what we have failed to recognize is that poverty also places enormous economic, social, and psychological costs on the nonpoor as well. These costs affect us both individually and as a nation, although we have been slow to recognize them. Too often the attitude has been, "I don't see how I'm affected, so why worry about it?"

Poverty Affects Us All

Yet the issues that many Americans are in fact deeply concerned about, such as crime, access to and affordability of health care, race relations, and worker productivity, to name but a few, are directly affected and exacerbated by the condition of poverty. As a result, the general public winds up paying a heavy price for allowing poverty to walk in our midst. A report by the Children's Defense Fund on the costs of childhood poverty makes this strikingly clear,

The children who suffer poverty's effects are not its only victims. When children do not succeed as adults, all of society pays the price: businesses are able to find fewer good workers, consumers pay more for their goods, hospitals and health insurers spend more treating preventable illnesses, teachers spend more time on remediation and special education, private citizens feel less safe on the streets, governors hire more prison guards, mayors must pay to shelter homeless families, judges must hear more criminal, domestic, and other cases, taxpayers pay for problems that could have been prevented, fire and medical workers must respond to emergencies that never should have happened, and funeral directors must bury children who never should have died.

When we speak of homeland security, these are the issues that truly undermine us and our security as a nation.

Quantifying the Costs

There have been several attempts to quantify the cost of poverty in terms of a monetary amount. However, the ability to estimate the magnitude of the costs surrounding an issue such as poverty is exceedingly complex. Nevertheless, in one study conducted nearly 10 years ago, researchers calculated the costs of childhood poverty with respect to increased health care costs, increased costs in crime, and costs associated with reduced productivity and economic output. The authors estimated that the overall economic costs of childhood poverty in the U.S. totaled approximately

500 billion dollars a year, or nearly 4 percent of the nation's annual gross domestic product or GDP. In a recent reanalysis of the costs of childhood poverty, we have put a revised annual price tag of just under 1 trillion dollars.

Suffice it to say that poverty exacts a high toll upon both the poor and the nonpoor in our country. In your thinking and discussions of poverty, what are some of the other reasons that may be important for reducing poverty? One line of thinking is to explore and consider the concepts of social justice and fairness with respect to poverty. Is the condition of poverty just? Why or why not? What about childhood poverty or poverty amongst the elderly? Is impoverishment among these groups fair? Should Americans who work full-time still be mired in poverty? Why or why not? There are many approaches to thinking about why reducing poverty is important. ★