

# What do we really know about poverty?

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The holidays are a time we focus on those in need and heap scorn on the Scrooges and Mr. Potters who don't. But how well do we understand poverty otherwise—such as who's poor, where they live, and the help that is or isn't available? Are we operating, in some cases, from old or faulty assumptions? U. of I. sociology professor Brian Dill teaches an

introductory course on poverty, in both classroom and online versions, and spoke with News Bureau social sciences editor Craig Chamberlain.

## **What do you find to be the biggest misconceptions about who is poor?**

I hear three misunderstandings from my students. First, they overestimate the number of people around the world in extreme poverty. They often assume that more than one-third of humanity is living below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day. While this was the case in 1990, it has declined rapidly over the past three decades to just under 10 percent.

This is still unacceptably high. But it is important to understand that efforts to alleviate poverty are having an impact. Much of the progress can be attributed to the mobilization behind eight Millennium Development Goals that were the focus of the global community from 2000-15. This effort helped to cut the extreme poverty rate in half, increase the number of children attending schools, reduce infant and maternal mortality, and improve access to clean water.

The second misconception is about where the American poor are located. Poverty in the U.S. has long been associated with large urban centers such as Chicago's South Side or rural communities such as Appalachia, where it historically has been most concentrated. While poverty rates continue to be higher than average in those places, it's the suburbs that have, over the past two decades, become home to the largest number of poor residents.

A third misconception concerns poverty and work. Students often assume that, almost by definition, the poor are unemployed. It's correct that a majority of those below the poverty level do not work. But this

includes children, the elderly and the disabled poor. And about 7 million of our fellow citizens—5 percent of the active labor force—can be classified as the "working poor."

## **How do assumptions about welfare in the U.S. meet with the reality? What help is actually available, and for whom?**

Recent polls show that the American public is generally sympathetic to the poor and supportive of greater government efforts to fight poverty. Most think that the poor are hard working and their circumstances are due more to forces beyond their control, rather than a lack of effort. Views shift, however, when survey questions refer to "welfare" rather than "poverty." A majority believe the government spends too little on the poor, but half say it's spending too much on welfare.

"Welfare" can refer to a variety of public assistance programs, and surveys do not provide much clarity about how the public feels about specific programs. I suspect that our views have been shaped by the forceful critiques of the welfare system by Presidents Reagan and Clinton, both of whom emphasized the perceived excesses of cash assistance.

The law Clinton signed in 1996 replaced the previous cash assistance program with Temporary Aid to Needy Families, which added work requirements, caps for how long and how much aid a person could receive, and harsher punishments for recipients who did not comply with the requirements. As a result, the number of recipients of cash assistance shrunk dramatically over the two decades after—from 68 percent to 23 percent of families below the poverty line, according to the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Broadly speaking, public assistance in the U.S. is oriented toward those who work. Arguably one of the most successful anti-poverty programs is the Earned Income Tax Credit, which supplements the earnings of low- and moderate-income working people. The link between work and public assistance can also be seen in the Trump administration's recent announcement that it intends to tighten work requirements for the federal food stamp program, known by the acronym SNAP.

Overall, childless adults aged 18-49 without disabilities receive limited public assistance. And evidence suggests that low-income workers without children are the only group that is pushed deeper into poverty by the federal tax system, largely because they are eligible for only a very small EITC.

## **Is there any kind of common understanding about the nature of poverty that bridges partisan divides or suggests approaches we haven't tried?**

There is no simple way to explain the existence and persistence of poverty. There are multiple, overlapping causes that vary by context and over time. Those debating the causes of poverty in the U.S. have tended to advocate on behalf of either an individualist or structuralist perspective, and it is important to stress that people's views have often been shaped by their political values rather than empirical evidence.

Proponents of the individualist perspective explain poverty mainly as resulting from personal weaknesses, failings and inadequacies—such as making bad choices, failing to contain desires or neglecting to plan for the future. Those taking a structuralist perspective argue that poverty is caused by a shortage of decent-paying jobs, inadequate safety nets, discrimination and the distribution of power and resources beyond any individual's control.

One approach that has gained considerable attention over the past two decades is grounded in an understanding of both the structural impediments confronting [poor people](#) and their individual capacities to change their circumstances. It involves giving money directly to the poor through cash-transfer programs. Support for transfers stems from the understanding that low and variable income is central to the reproduction of poverty. Providing poor households with modest-but-regular income can help to smooth consumption and sustain spending on food, health care and education when times are tough, and protects the poor from the need to sell assets and take on debt.

## **Your students are a diverse mix from both the U.S. and abroad. What are the challenges or insights that result from teaching a course on global poverty?**

Although my students come from diverse backgrounds, the vast majority have had little, if any, direct experience with poverty, particularly the [extreme poverty](#) that is encountered in developing countries. A key challenge is helping them to move beyond the single story that we often tell about poverty, a story that focuses on the individual and identifies poverty with those who are different from us.

In the U.S., for example, poverty is often viewed as a problem that affects minorities and the so-called underclass. Evidence suggests, however, that more than half of the American population will experience at least one year in their lifetimes below the official poverty line. It is important therefore to understand that [poverty](#) is not a quality of a certain type of person but rather a condition that will be experienced by a majority.

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