

FEATURES

I am for doing good to the poor, but I differ in opinion of the means. I think the best way of doing good to the poor is not making them easy in poverty, but leading or driving them out of it.

—Benjamin Franklin

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY IN AMERICA

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Poverty is an important and emotional issue. Last year, the Census Bureau released its annual report on poverty in the United States declaring that there were nearly 35 million poor persons living in this country in 2002, a small increase from the preceding year. To understand poverty in America, it is important to look behind these numbers—to look at the actual living conditions of the individuals the government deems to be poor.

For most Americans, the word “poverty” suggests destitution: an inability to provide a family with nutritious food, clothing, and reasonable shelter. But only a small number of the 35 million persons classified as “poor” by the Census Bureau fit that description. While real material hardship certainly does occur, it is limited in scope and severity. Most of America’s “poor” live in material conditions that would be judged as comfortable or well-off just a few generations ago. Today, the expenditures per person of the lowest-income one-fifth (or quintile) of households equal those of the median American household in the early 1970s, after adjusting for inflation.

As a group, America’s poor are far from being chronically undernourished. The average consumption of protein, vitamins, and minerals is virtually the same for poor and middle-class children and, in most cases, is well above recommended norms. Poor children actually consume more meat than do higher-income children and have average protein intakes 100 percent above recommended levels. Most poor children today are, in fact, supernourished and grow up to be, on average, one inch taller and 10 pounds heavier than the GIs who stormed the beaches of Normandy in World War II.



While the poor are generally well-nourished, some poor families do experience hunger, meaning a temporary discomfort due to food shortages. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 13 percent of poor families and 2.6 percent of poor children experience hunger at some point during the year. In most cases, their hunger is short-term. Eighty-nine percent of the poor report their families have “enough” food to eat, while only 2 percent say they “often” do not have enough to eat.

Overall, the typical American defined as poor by the government has a car, air conditioning, a refrigerator, a stove, a clothes washer and dryer, and a microwave. He has two color televisions, cable or satellite TV reception, a VCR or DVD player, and a stereo. He is able to obtain medical care. His home is in good repair and is not overcrowded. By his own report, his family is not hungry and he had sufficient funds in the past year to meet his family’s essential needs. While this individual’s life is not opulent, it is equally far from the popular images of dire poverty conveyed by the press, liberal activists, and politicians.

Of course, the living conditions of the average poor American should not be taken as representing all the poor. There is actually a wide range in living conditions among the poor. For example, over a quarter of poor households have cell phones and telephone answering machines, but, at the other extreme, approximately one-tenth have no phone at all. While the majority of poor households do not experience significant material problems, roughly a third do experience at least one problem such as overcrowding, temporary hunger, or difficulty getting medical care.

footage of living space. The average poor American has more square footage of living space than does the average person living in London, Paris, Vienna, and Munich. Poor Americans have nearly three times the living space of average urban citizens in middle-income countries such as Mexico and Turkey.

Hunger and Malnutrition

There are frequent charges of widespread hunger and malnutrition in the United States. To understand these assertions, it is important, first of all, to distinguish between hunger and the more severe problem of malnutrition. Malnutrition (also called undernutrition) is a condition of reduced health due to a chronic shortage of calories and nutrients. There is little or no evidence of poverty-induced malnutrition in the United States.

Hunger is relatively rare among U.S. children, and it has declined sharply since the mid-1990s. The number of hungry children was cut by a third between 1995 and 2002.

Overall, some 97 percent of the U.S. population lived in families that reported they had “enough food to eat” during the entire year, although not always the kinds of foods they would have preferred. Around 2.5 percent stated their families “sometimes” did not have “enough to eat” due to money shortages, and one-half of 1 percent (0.5 percent) said they “often” did not have enough to eat due to a lack of funds.

Among the poor, the hunger rate was obviously higher: During 2002, 12.8 percent of the poor lived in households in which at least one member experienced hunger at some point. Among poor children, 2.4 percent experienced hunger at some point in the year. Overall, most poor households were not hungry and did not experience food shortages during the year.

When asked, some 89 percent of poor households reported they had “enough food to eat” during the entire year, although not always the kinds of food they would prefer. Around 9 percent stated they “sometimes” did not have enough to eat because of a lack of money to buy food. Another 2 percent of the poor stated that they “often” did not have enough to eat due to a lack of funds.

The principal nutrition-related health problem among the poor, as with the general U.S. population, stems from the overconsumption, not underconsumption, of food. While overweight and obesity are prevalent problems throughout

the U.S. population, they are found most frequently among poor adults. Poor adult men are slightly less likely than non-poor men to be overweight (30.4 percent compared to 31.9 percent); but poor adult women are significantly more likely to be overweight than are non-poor women (47.3 percent compared to 32 percent).

Living Conditions and Hardships

Overall, the living standards of most poor Americans are far higher than is generally appreciated. The overwhelming majority of poor families are well-housed, have adequate food, and enjoy a wide range of modern amenities, including air conditioning and cable television. Some 70 percent of poor households report that during the course of the past year they were able to meet “all essential expenses,” including mortgage, rent, utility bills, and important medical care.

The most common problem facing poor households was late payment of rent or utilities. While having difficulty paying monthly bills is stressful, in most cases late payment did not result in material hardship or deprivation.

While it is appropriate to be concerned about the difficulties faced by some poor families, it is important to keep these problems in perspective. Many poor families have intermittent difficulty paying rent or utility bills but remain very well-housed by historic or international standards. Even poor families who are overcrowded and hungry, by U.S. standards, are still likely to have living conditions that are far above the world average.

Reducing Child Poverty

The generally high living standards of poor Americans are good news. Even better is the fact that our nation can readily reduce remaining poverty, especially among children. To accomplish this, we must focus on the main causes of child poverty: low levels of parental work and high levels of single parenthood.

In good economic times or bad, the typical poor family with children is supported by only 800 hours of work during a year: that amounts to 16 hours of work per week. If work in each family were raised to 2,000 hours per year—the equivalent of one adult working 40 hours per week through the year—nearly 75 percent of poor children would be lifted out of official poverty.

The decline in marriage is the second major cause of child poverty. Nearly two-thirds of poor children reside in single-parent homes; each year,

