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Poverty in America Is Mainstream

By [MARK R. RANK](#)

[The Great Divide](#) is a series about inequality.

Few topics in American society have more myths and stereotypes surrounding them than poverty, misconceptions that distort both our politics and our domestic policy making.

They 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 a result of not working hard enough. Although pervasive, each assumption is flat-out wrong.

Contrary to popular belief, the percentage of the population that directly encounters poverty is exceedingly high. My research indicates that nearly 40 percent of Americans between the ages of 25 and 60 will experience at least one year below the official poverty line during that period (\$23,492 for a family of four), and 54 percent will spend a year in poverty or near poverty (below 150 percent of the poverty line).

Even more astounding, if we add in related conditions like welfare use, near-poverty and unemployment, four out of five Americans will encounter one or more of these events.

In addition, 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.

Put simply, poverty is a mainstream event experienced by a majority of Americans. For most of us, the question is not whether we will experience poverty, but when.

But while poverty strikes a majority of the population, the average time most people spend in poverty is relatively short. The standard image of the poor has been that of an entrenched underclass, impoverished for years at a time. While this captures a small and important slice of poverty, it is also a highly misleading picture of its more widespread and dynamic nature.

Most of us have been poor, at least for awhile.

The typical pattern is for an individual to 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 like losing a job, having work hours cut back, experiencing a family split or developing a serious medical problem all have the potential to throw households into poverty.

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. This is another myth: According to the latest Census Bureau numbers, two-thirds of those below the poverty line identified themselves as white — a number that has held rather steady over the past several decades.

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 because of 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 it. And the United States is one of the few developed nations that does not provide universal health care, affordable child care, or reasonably priced low-income housing. As a result, our poverty rate is approximately twice the European average.

Whether we examine childhood 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. The many who find themselves in poverty are often shocked at how little assistance the government actually provides to help them through tough times.

Finally, the common explanation for poverty has emphasized a lack of motivation, the failure to work hard enough and poor decision making in life.

Yet my research and that of others has consistently found that the behaviors and attitudes of those in poverty basically mirror those of mainstream America. Likewise, a vast majority of the poor have worked extensively and will do so again. Poverty is ultimately a result of failings at economic and political levels rather than individual shortcomings.

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 and child care and having access to a first-rate education. Yet these policies will become a reality only when we begin to truly understand that poverty is an issue of us, rather than an issue of them.

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