

Test Your Knowledge Of Poverty In America¹

Please answer all questions True or False before turning the page to see the answers.

1. Inequality of incomes has improved in the last 25 years. (True/False)
2. People graduate from college to become doctors, lawyers, politicians, judges, social workers, educators and fill many other professions without ever having studied the history of poverty --it's structural causes, or the models we have used to address poverty in America. (True/False)
3. People earning minimum wage are able to afford a modest, two bedroom apartment in America. (True/False)
4. The Federal Poverty Guideline is an accurate indicator of how many people live in poverty in America. (True/False)
5. The majority of American's believe poverty is caused by people's behavior and bad choices. (True/False)
6. Prison will solve poverty related problems. (True/False)
7. People in poverty are to blame for drugs, alcohol, sex abuse, child abuse, domestic violence and other social ills. (True/False)
8. Parents who do not go to school conferences do not care about their children. (True/False)
9. Headstart, the preschool program for children in poverty, is available to all four-year old who live in poverty. (True/False)
10. People get rich by begging on the streets, getting welfare and having babies to get more welfare. (True/False)
11. People in poverty are irresponsible because they buy cable television, cigarettes, and Nike shoes. (True/False)
12. If you work hard, you will move up the economic ladder in the American labor market. (True/False)

¹ From Dr. Donna Beegle's Communication Across Barriers website:
www.combarriers.com

1. False.

Inequality of income has gotten worse in the last 25 years. The richest 1/5 of American households controlled 53.5 percent of the income compared with 45.4 percent in 1979. The bottom fifth dropped from 5.8 percent to 4.1 percent. Globalization, International trade, and the shrinkage of organized labor are cited as factors causing the widening income gaps by Federal Reserve Chair, Ben Bernake (Rosenfeld, New York Times, Feb. 18, 2007).

2. True.

The majority of Americans have never had a course on the history of poverty in the United States. Overwhelmingly, what people do know about poverty are stereotypes learned from the media. Students are not taught the structural causes of poverty, such as unaffordable housing, jobs that do not pay enough to pay rent, utilities and buy food (2/3 of those in poverty are working 1.7 jobs according to the 2000 Census), lack of access to health and dental care (48 million Americans cannot go to the doctor, even more are without access to dental care), fragmented, under-funded, and often punitive social service systems, under-funded education systems, and lack of public transportation systems to get people where they need to be when they need to be there. Without education and awareness of history and poverty realities, decisions are made, policies are developed, funding is allocated and people in poverty are often treated badly, which perpetuates the poverty cycle.

3. True.

In one tiny town in Georgia, a person earning minimum wage can afford a modest two bedroom apartment, but FALSE in the rest of America. HUD reports that with the exception of the tiny Georgia town, a person earning minimum wage will pay the bulk of their income for shelter and have little or no resources for food, electricity, health care and other basic needs.

4. False.

According to the 2000 Census, 37 million Americans live in poverty. Poverty is defined as a family of four with income below \$20,815. We arrive at that income based on the Federal Poverty Guideline. This Federal Poverty Guideline is calculated using a formula developed for cost of living in the 1960s. In the 1960s, economists believed that families spent 1/3 of their income on food. The formula takes the cost of food and multiplies that by three to calculate a family budget. Families in 2007 do not spend 1/3 of their budget on food. The bulk of a family income today, is spent on shelter. The 1960s formula does not include health care, transportation, or childcare as part of a family budget. The Economic Policy Institute reports that if you were to add health care, childcare and transportation into the calculation of a family budget, a family of three would need \$30,000 just to provide the basics. The 37 million people in poverty identified using the 1960s cost of living formula, would likely double (or possibly triple) if we were to update the formula for 2007 cost of living.

5. True.

Because we have a strong belief in America that everyone has the same chance of making it, and because people are uneducated about the realities that people in poverty face, poverty causes are attributed to behavior and choices. A child born into homelessness, hunger, and illiteracy is believed to have the same opportunities as the child born into privilege. We do not take into consideration the impact of environment on behavior and choices. People facing the crisis of poverty are not likely to "behave" and respond in the same way as someone without those stresses. Do you respond the same when you are stressed as when you are not? Your circumstance may not always allow you to be "good" and plan ahead for your future. Most people in poverty do what they have to do to get basic survival needs and to help those they love who are also in crisis. It is hard to think about having a future when your family is hungry today.

6. False.

We are nearing the 2.5 million mark for number of American's in prison. The majority of people

in prison cannot read at the eighth grade level. If we continue to incarcerate America's poor, we won't have to talk about affordable housing. We will have to talk about economic impact on our society. The average cost of prison, per person for one year is \$30,000. In many cities and towns throughout America, prisons are the largest employer and the biggest business. 1 in every 32 American's have been or are currently incarcerated. We use prison to try to solve many poverty issues (i.e. people go to prison for writing bad checks to pay rent, selling drugs to buy food, stealing to pay for basic needs). Imagine what would happen if we spent \$30,000 per person on training, housing, education-enabling people to earn a living wage?

7. False.

We have plenty of privileged people who are alcoholics, drug addicts, who abuse children (look at the Catholic Priest scandals) and who break laws. The difference for privileged people is that if they are addicted to drugs or alcohol, they have resources to get rehabilitation and help. For people in poverty who become addicted, the answer to their addiction is generally incarceration. Few communities in the Nation have resources allocated to meet the needs of people in poverty who are drug or alcohol affected. A privileged person can buy services a person in poverty, if they are lucky, gets on a wait list for help or they are given inadequate services. For example, the national average rehab program for someone in poverty, who is addicted, is between five and 30 days. Research shows, that for many drugs, a minimum of six months to one year of rehab services are needed. The person in poverty who receives 30 days rehab for a meth addiction is highly likely to fall back into that addiction. The societal response is generally to blame or attribute their relapse to their personality ("that's just the kind of person they are" or "they really didn't want a better life"). Instead of examining the literature on addictions which, is clear, for many drugs such as meth, a year of intensive rehab is recommended.

8. False.

Privilege and power provide the luxury of having the time. Vocabulary, and knowledge of education norms. My mom would say, "I ain't going in there and make a fool out of myself. Those people want to talk about school. I don't know anything about school. There's no point in me going in there." If someone had asked my mom to come tell them about me, she would have been there in a heartbeat. I am her pride and joy, she loves me. We tend to use faulty logic when assessing the behavior of people in poverty. For example, if my child had a conference, I would be there. Therefore, I care about my child. If someone does not come, it must mean, they do not care.

9. False.

Nationally, half of all four-year old in poverty are turned away or put on a wait list. Despite solid, longitudinal research that shows children who attend Headstart are more ready to learn when they arrive at elementary school and more likely than children who did not attend Headstart to complete their education.

10. False.

People are not getting rich from begging on the streets. Think about it. Many people are destitute and desperate. They may believe with their education and skills, their only hope in this economy is begging or welfare, neither option provides dignity for human beings. We have policy that does not allow someone who has a criminal record to receive housing assistance. Many landlords will not rent to someone with a criminal conviction. Where are they supposed to go? You can say, "I don't care, they should have thought of that before committing a crime," but the reality is, most people who commit crimes will someday get out of jail or prison. If we won't hire them or rent to them, they will be on our streets. The average welfare check for one adult and two children in 1986, was \$408. The average welfare check in 2007, for one adult, two children is, \$478. If you have additional children while on welfare, the average increase for a new baby, is \$60. per month. People do not get rich from welfare. Welfare does not even provide enough to pay for rent. HUD reports the average rent for a modest, two bedroom apartment in the U.S. is \$750. The average disability check is \$604. Neither welfare or disability provides enough for a person to pay for basic needs.

11. False.

Paulo Freire, a World Poverty expert, says every society teaches its people what it takes to belong. Abraham Maslow, a human development expert, says that for human beings, belonging is almost as important as eating. We have a basic, human need to belong. In the U.S., what messages do we send to people showing what they need to belong? If you are a kid in high school, what kind of tennis shoes do you need? If you can't talk about what is on cable television, you can't be part of many conversations and you do not belong. We teach kids today, that they need a cell phone to belong!

If we frame the behavior in a societal context, it allows us to address its roots, not blame and judge people for behaving in ways that our society has socialized them to behave. Finally, cigarette smoking is an addiction. We get angry at people in poverty who smoke. But how much does it cost to quit? Is there access to counselling "real access" (transportation, someone to reach out to you and help you access the resource)? Nicorette and other stop-smoking products range from \$300-\$500 for just three stages. Smoking has been found to calm nerves. Many people in the crisis of poverty (as well as those in privilege) seek ways to calm nerves and prey to addictive substance in tobacco.

12. True and False.

True if you are skilled or educated. False if you are uneducated, unskilled labor. We know that even one year of college increases income. Scholars project by 2014, fewer than 7% of living wage jobs will go to someone with a high school diploma or less. People in poverty are the least likely to receive an education. In America, we believe if you work hard, you move up. The statistics say, this is not true without an education or skill. Who works harder, the migrant labor worker, or the person in an office cubicle? If the migrant labor worker hurries to finish his or her row, what do they get? They do not move up. Two-thirds of the people in poverty are working 1.7 jobs according to the Census and they still cannot pay their rent and buy food.

Without education or a skill, the average income increase after working for 10 years in the American labor market is \$2.00. As you age in the labor market, you are less likely to earn a living wage if you do not have education or skills. People who work in menial, seasonal or temporary jobs, generally use their "bodies" or physical strength to earn a living. Employers need young, physically healthy workers to perform the physically demanding jobs. Many jobs that used to pay a living wage for those who were uneducated or not skilled, are not available due to globalization and automation. Even with the knowledge that unskilled, uneducated workers are not likely to earn a living wage, welfare policy does not allow people on welfare to go to school or get training while receiving benefits to meet their basic needs. We push people into minimum wage jobs, take away childcare and health care benefits and watch as many plummet into desperate situations of homelessness, sickness, and incarceration. Many often return to welfare in even worse shape.