



## Breaking the Iron Cage: *Helping People in Poverty Move Forward*

**T**hank you for choosing a profession where you have opportunities to change lives. Your role in assisting people with moving out of poverty is an honorable choice. Maybe you are already a hero to many people moving forward, or perhaps working with people in poverty is a new challenge for you. Either way, this training is designed to provide you with a foundation for understanding what it means to live in poverty in the United States and strategies to help people break through the “iron cage” and move forward. This Learning Guide serves as a take-away for you to revisit concepts covered in the training. For more in-depth learning, please refer to “*Free Poverty...Be the Difference,*” by Dr. Donna Beegle.

Stereotypes of people living in poverty in America are deeply imbedded in our society. Before our country can move forward with fighting the war on poverty, we must make a collective effort to examine personal beliefs and open our minds to new interpretations of the behavior of those struggling without basic needs. Attitudes and beliefs shape tone of voice, body posture, facial expressions and actions toward others. If you are judging behavior, then you cannot connect. Therefore, it is important to reflect on beliefs.

### Questions to reflect on:

- What do you believe causes poverty?
- Where do your beliefs come from? (For example, your parents, environment, community, media, personal experience, etc?)
- How are your experiences and exposure to opportunities, while growing up, different than the people struggling in poverty that you serve?
- Are you armed with the facts about poverty in your community?
- Are you able to suspend judgement and believe that people are making the best decisions possible from their perspective?

Are you willing to assist people who may believe and respond differently than you?



### In this Learning Guide

- Poverty Realities in America
- Types of Poverty
- The Meaning of Poverty
- Strategies to Break Poverty Barriers
- Building Relationships; Navigating

# Poverty Realities in America

**The Numbers** Far too many people, mostly children, suffer from poverty conditions. More than 15% of the population, 43.2 million Americans, live in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2010). Research shows that it is very difficult for people born into poverty to achieve an education and earn a living wage.

**Housing** 1 in 4 working households in America (10.6 million families) spend more than half of their pre-tax income on housing. This is a level that experts say is unhealthy, if not impossible, to sustain. There is no community in America where minimum wage earners can reasonably afford to pay rent. In February 2012, the National Low Income Housing Coalition conducted a study that examined the cost of housing across the United States and found that no city had rentals priced low enough where a minimum wage earner could live comfortably. In 86% of counties surveyed, even those who earned twice the minimum wage still did not earn enough money to pay rent and other basic needs.

**Welfare** Government assistance falls short of covering basic needs. Many people cling to it because they see no options for earning money for survival with their limited skills, education, and literacy levels. Nationally, the average welfare check for one parent and two children is \$478 per month. Twenty years ago, it was \$408. The national average added for a baby born to a family already on welfare is \$60. The average disability check is \$600. Less than 2% of the federal budget is allocated for welfare.

**Food** The rates of hunger continue to be extremely high for an industrialized nation. Many people think hunger does not exist because of obesity. The fact is 46 million people suffer food insecurity and one-third of this group experience chronic hunger. A person on food stamps receives \$3.00 per day. Healthy food is expensive.

**Working Hard** Many people work hard and are still not making it. There is a dominant belief in our society that if one works hard enough they will do well. According to the recent census, two-thirds of people living in poverty are working 1.7 jobs.

**Education** Youth living in poverty are the least likely to become educated in our nation. Many students living in poverty have low academic achievements and schools struggle to address their needs. Families living in poverty often experience education as "stress" and see it as a place where they do not belong. A college education can help people break the barriers of poverty and escape its hardships; yet today, it is less likely a person in poverty will attain a college education than it was in the 1940's.

**Effects of Poverty** Many people in poverty have internalized their poverty as a personal deficiency. They see no hope for anything but an insufficient welfare or disability check, or underground activities that barely pay enough to keep food on the table and often result in incarceration. Nearly 80 percent of people in prison cannot read at an 8th grade level. Poverty affects education success, health, relationships, and most of all it affects the ability for humans to develop to their full potential.

**We can do better** A deeper understanding of poverty and the barriers it presents is highly needed. It requires community members and professionals being consistent in saying, "Poverty is an issue we are going to address." It requires each and every one of us exploring what is in our hands to make a difference for those living in poverty. Who do you know that might be able to assist us in breaking barriers to moving out of poverty?



# Building Relationships & Navigating

Building a relationship with a person living in poverty can be the most impactful strategy for helping them move forward. Research on people who grew up in poverty and later became successful shows that most of them had people in their lives who helped them “Navigate” the middle class world (sources: *See Poverty...Be the Difference* by Dr. Donna M. Beegle (2000), and *Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College* by Levine and Nidiffer (1996)). Moving out of poverty is not due to being “born smarter” or simply “trying harder” than others, as the Hollywood rags-to-riches movies would like you to believe. People in poverty move up when they develop meaningful, supportive relationships with middle class individuals who help them in a variety of ways: helping them feel like they belong in a middle-class environment; navigating resources; removing barriers; and, connecting to opportunities to succeed.

## Believe in the person’s ability to get out of poverty.

- Tell people many times, in many ways, that you believe in them, think they are smart, and have skills and talents and can learn more.
- Find ways to help them understand that what they currently know is not all they can know.

## Believe the person has strengths and talents.

- Practice a strengths-based approach; look for what is good and right about the people.
- Build on their current knowledge and skills, suggest programs, classes or activities that can help them move forward. When you suggest activities, tell them you think they would be great at it.
- Set people up for success. Make sure they have all the resources needed (transportation, clothes, etiquette, etc.) to participate in the programs you suggest.

## Know the benefits of connecting people to others who are educated.

- Introduce people to others who have benefited from education or who have moved up in a job.
- Help people in poverty understand that those who are educated are not “better,” they just have had different experiences and opportunities.
- Help people feel a sense of “belonging” among new environments and new people.

## Know that assets are critical to success and how to build them.

- Understand that people need supports to succeed; no one does everything alone.
- Give information, examples, and supports to build internal (self-confidence, hope) and external capacity (supplies, knowledge, transportation, etc.).
- For youth, visit the Search Institute online and download The 40 Developmental Assets.

## Know how to navigate middle-class systems, procedures, and paperwork.

- Help find and connect people to resources needed and to those who can help.
- Assist with filling out paperwork, applications for services or programs, etc.
- Teach people how to advocate for themselves (find resources, ask questions, etc).



# Types of Poverty

## What We Learn is Based on Life Experiences

The word “poverty” is used to describe many different life situations. Some people may be from generational poverty, others may be experiencing working-class poverty. Each of these life experiences shape expectations, knowledge, confidence and opportunities for gaining an education.

Below are some characteristics of different life experiences labeled “Poverty.”

### Generational Poverty

- Workers of the land, as opposed to owners of the land
- Never knew anyone who benefited from education
- Never knew anyone who moved up or was respected in a job
- Highly mobile, move frequently looking for work
- High family illiteracy
- Focus is on making it through the day



### Working-Class Poverty

- Working, but barely able to pay for basic needs (no money for any extras)
- Renters as opposed to home owners
- Live pay-check to pay-check
- Few have health care
- Focus on making it two weeks or through the month
- Poverty seen as personal deficiency



### Immigrant Poverty

- Have little or no resources
- Face language and culture barriers
- Seem to have a stronger sense of self than working and generational poverty
- Often do better than those born into poverty in America
- Poverty viewed as a system problem



### Situational Poverty

- Grows up in stable environment with basic needs met and more
- Attends school regularly, has health care, family vacations, etc.
- Surrounded by educated people with living wage jobs
- As adult, has crisis (health, divorce, etc.) and income drops
- Generally able to make it back to middle-class
- Has not internalized poverty as personal deficiency
- Does not recognize advantages of growing up middle-class
- Can be harsh judge of those in poverty

