



ACTION AGAINST HUNGER

JUST THE FACTS:

Poverty Myths & Stereotypes

Poverty is an exhausting, time-consuming struggle of trying to make ends meet. It is the daily stress of having to choose between whether to pay the rent, pay the electric bill, or pay for food. It is the daily worry about whether the car will break down or someone will get ill or your child will need a new pair of shoes, and then deciding which necessity will have to be sacrificed to pay for the added expense of the unexpected bill. Poverty robs you of a sense of security, it destroys your self-esteem, and it undermines your plans and your hopes for the future.

The Hard Numbers

More than 40% of Americans between the ages of 25 and 60 will be poor for at least a year of their lives. Over the same period, more than half of Americans will be poor or nearly poor, with income at 150% of the poverty line. Today, more than **47 million Americans** live in poverty, including **1 in 5 children**. Locally, in **Allegheny County**, **12.7%** of the overall population (roughly 155,000 people, including 43,000 children), live at or below the poverty line according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2013, the federal government placed the poverty line at a maximum of \$23,550 in gross cash income for a family of four; \$19,530 for a family of three; \$15,510 for a family of two, and \$11,490 for an individual.

Myths and Stereotypes about Poverty

People living in poverty have to make tough choices with their money all day, every day, with no room for error but plenty of judgment from others. Many people who do not live in poverty have a tendency to criticize the poor and blame them for their supposed laziness, lack of intelligence, or willingness to make bad decisions. They believe in a just world, where the poor must have done something to deserve their fate.

This belief helps fuel the many myths and stereotypes that negatively impact those living in poverty in the U.S. Here are just a few of them:

➤ **MYTH: Poor people are unmotivated and have weak work ethics.**

The Reality: Poor people do not have weaker work ethics or lower levels of motivation than wealthier people. Although poor people are often stereotyped as lazy, two-thirds of people living in poverty work an average of 1.7 jobs; 83% of children from low-income families have at least one employed parent; and close to 60% of children have at least one parent who works full-time and year-round. According to the Economic Policy Institute, poor working adults spend more hours working each week than their wealthier counterparts.

➤ **MYTH: A huge chunk of my tax dollars supports welfare recipients.**

The Reality: Welfare costs about 1% of the Federal Budget. The majority of those living in poverty do not receive government welfare assistance.

➤ **MYTH: Those who get on welfare stay on welfare.**

The Reality: Of the poor that receive welfare assistance, more than half stop receiving benefits after a year, 70% within two years, and 85% within four years.

➤ **MYTH: Social mobility is possible by working hard.**

The Reality: This is not our grandfathers' era where people could simply "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," assuming that was ever really true. Our current economy requires workers to be more skilled than in the past. Meanwhile, jobs for unskilled workers simply don't pay enough. The minimum wage 50 years ago was worth \$15.29 in 2014 dollars. Today, an education provides the bootstraps people need for social mobility. However, many people who live in poverty cannot afford the costs associated with secondary education.

➤ **MYTH: Poor parents are uninvolved in their children's learning, largely because they do not value education.**

The Reality: Low-income parents hold the same attitudes about education that wealthy parents do. Low-income parents might be less likely to attend school functions or volunteer in their children's classrooms—not because they care less about education, but because they have less access to school involvement than their wealthier peers. They are more likely to work multiple jobs, to work evenings, to have jobs without paid leave, and to be unable to afford child care and public transportation.

➤ **MYTH: Poor people have babies to get more welfare.**

The Reality: Welfare recipients in Pennsylvania receive \$83 per month for additional children is – well below the costs of raising a child – and in some states the amount is zero. The average welfare family is no larger than the average non-recipient American family. Welfare benefits are not a significant incentive for childbearing.

➤ **MYTH: Poverty has little lasting impact on children.**

The Reality: Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children's well-being. Poverty can impede children's ability to learn and contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Poverty also can contribute to poor physical and mental health, and poor self-esteem. Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young and/or experience deep and persistent poverty.

➤ **MYTH: Poverty is a minority issue.**

The Reality: Poverty is not solely a minority issue. Poverty affects people of all races. Of the Americans living in poverty today, 42% are White, 29% are Hispanic or Latino, 25% are Black or African American, and 4% are Asian. However, poverty has a disparate impact on people of color.

➤ **MYTH: Poor people tend to abuse drugs and alcohol.**

The Reality: Poor people are no more likely than their wealthier counterparts to abuse alcohol or drugs. Although drug sales are more visible in poor neighborhoods, drug use is equally distributed across poor, middle class, and wealthy communities. Studies have found that alcohol consumption is significantly higher among upper middle class white high school students than among poor black high school students. This finding supports a history of research showing that alcohol abuse is far more prevalent among wealthy people than among poor people.

How You Can Help

Each of us has the power to help fight poverty, and the myths and stereotypes about poverty in the U.S. Here are some ways you can get involved:

- Speak up** when someone is blaming the poor or stereotyping the poor as needy, ill, deficient, or not to be trusted.
- Speak out to your local elected officials** at all levels of government about poverty issues, like raising the minimum wage and making quality education, preschool, child care, housing, health insurance, and public transportation affordable and accessible for all.
- Vote.** We have the means to end poverty. We must elect officials who have the will.
- Make a donation to Just Harvest.** Your donation will be used to help our mission. For more information, contact Ken Regal at (412) 431-8960 x115 / kenr@justharvest.org or donate online at www.justharvest.org/donate/.

Just Harvest is a non-profit charitable organization created in 1987. Our mission is to educate, empower and mobilize people to eliminate hunger, poverty, and economic injustice in our communities by influencing public policy, engaging in advocacy, and connecting people to public benefits.

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