

Debunking Poverty Myths and Stereotypes

Poverty is the exhausting, unending, time-consuming struggle of juggling and just hoping to make ends meet with no end in sight. 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 and it destroys your self-esteem and your hope for the future.

Today, more than 46 million Americans live in poverty. Locally, in Couleecap's four-county service area, almost 29,000 people, including 8,600 children, live at or below the poverty line according to the U.S. Census Bureau. What is the poverty line? In 2013, the federal government classifies a family of four as "poor" if its gross cash income is less than \$23,550; for a family of three, \$19,530; for a family of two, \$15,510; and for an individual, \$11,490.

In poverty, the choices you have are extremely different from the choices of those with privilege and access to resources. Those with privilege and access to resources have the luxury to make real choices about their future. The crisis of poverty rarely allows you to plan for your future. Most people in poverty do what they have to do to meet 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.

Myths and Stereotypes about Poverty

People living in poverty have to make tough choices with their money all day, every day, just to squeak by, and every dollar they spend could land them under the microscope. There's no room for error. And, unfortunately, there's plenty of judgment to go around 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.

There are many myths and misunderstandings that fuel stereotypes that negatively impact those living in poverty in the U.S. Here are just a few of many myths related to U.S. poverty:

➤ **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 those 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: Education is the key to social mobility, not “working hard.” Our current economy requires workers to be more skilled than in the past. This is not our grandfather’s era where people could simply “work hard and pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” 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: About \$60 per month is all that welfare recipients receive for additional children, 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

Americans have to move past stereotypes and focus on meeting the basic needs of those living in poverty, while setting them up for success, rather than berating them for not being middle class. 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:

- Educate yourself about poverty issues. Visit your local library or websites on the Internet. Some good websites are Wisconsin Community Action Program (WISCAP) – www.wiscap.org; Couleecap – www.couleecap.org; and Institute for Research on Poverty – www.irp.wisc.edu.
- Speak up when someone is blaming the poor – or stereotyping the poor as needy, ill, deficient, or not to be trusted.
- Support and vote for local elected officials who care about poverty issues.
- Increase affordable housing by joining a local housing coalition.
- Help low-income preschool children by volunteering in a Head Start classroom.
- Advocate for a higher minimum wage, more assistance for child care, more assistance with healthcare costs, and more assistance with transportation costs, so working families can get out of poverty.
- Support your local food pantries all year round.
- Make a donation to Couleecap's People Helping People Initiative. Your donation will be used to help our program participants: buy gas to get to work, buy books for school, buy food for their families, etc. For more information, contact Kadie Brueggen at 608-634-7363 or Kadie.Brueggen@couleecap.org.

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice. We are *People Helping People*, and everyday our *actions* make a difference in the lives of people and families throughout the Coulee Region. We currently implement more than 50 contracts in the areas of housing, emergency assistance, child and family development, business development, employment, transportation, and health. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 38,000 people work towards self-sufficiency.

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