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English 102

Who carries the moral responsibility concerning poverty?

When I was old enough to read but small enough to require a booster seat, Mom took me and my siblings with her whenever she went grocery shopping. Almost invariably a scruffy old guy with scrappy cloths, a cardboard sign, and sometimes a dog would be sitting at the entrances to the Walmart parking lot, asking for a ride, money, or some other help. From the back seat of the SUV, I looked out the window at one of these people. He smiled back at me. I turned to Mom and notified her of the weird poor guy over there wanting some help. Her reply was that he was probably just lazy. I was a child. She was my mom. I took her word for it.

This is a common point of view in the United States, that if you are poor you should just get a job and/or work harder. Better yet, if you want to stop being poor you should go to school, start a business, save, invest. In short, the individual is responsible for their own poverty. In the last few decades, however, researchers have been convinced that this is typically not the case, finding evidence that *society* is to blame for the nation's poverty. We know now (or at least have proof) that poverty isn't just a state of wealth – it's a trap. The biggest cause of poverty *is* poverty. So the question is, if the individual doesn't deserve to shoulder the full weight of poverty, who is obligated to give the impoverished a lift? Is any specific person or group particularly responsible for poverty? Is poverty something the rest of society needs to abolish collectively?

First, I want to dig into how poverty works. Reinforcing the idea that poverty is a trap, the study titled *Slipping into and out of Poverty: The Dynamics of Spells* found that “the longer a person has been poor, the less likely it is that he or she will escape poverty”. Furthermore, the

study finds that 20 percent of poverty spells in children (10 percent of poverty spells in all people) started when they were born and lasted more than 7 years, much longer than most poverty spells. Many argue that a child's early years are the most important in their life, so it's alarming that such a significant fraction of the impoverished are born into the poverty "trap". Minorities typically had even longer poverty spells after birth, and in general, proving that race is a factor. The report, *In a land of dollars: Deep poverty and its consequences*, found that while 5% of Caucasians were in deep poverty, more than twice the percentage of African Americans and Hispanics (10% and 12%, respectively) were also in deep poverty.

In *The Dynamics of Spells*, I found it interesting that while a change in income began a significant fraction of poverty spells (around 50 percent; more than any other individual factor), it was overwhelmingly a change in income that ended poverty spells (80 percent). Predictably, the deep poor and the poor spend less than the middle class almost across the board according to *Deep poverty and its consequences*. What was notable to me was how much the deep poor spent on insurance versus the middle class: the deep poor spend less than a tenth of what the middle class spends on insurance, and the poor spend a quarter. This is just one more reason it's so difficult to escape poverty: when the middle class is faced with unexpected expenses, insurance companies eat most of the costs; when the impoverished face similar unexpected expenses, they fall deeper, even terminally, into debt.

The ethics concerning how much aid the poor should receive are fuzzy and not agreed upon. As described at length in *The limits of moral responsibility for global poverty*, some ethicists argue that the aiding the poor is a waste of resources because there aren't enough resources for all of us. Others argue that we all have a responsibility to help the impoverished as long as they exist in poverty and we can help them. Of course, many fall somewhere in between,

arguing that while it's our responsibility to help the impoverished, it's morally sound to give more attention to loved ones. I can't agree with the argument that we have no responsibility, not in a world where some people starve while others live in luxury at the same time. I'm sympathetic to the argument that we are all responsible for aiding the impoverished if we aren't ourselves impoverished, but it's not realistic to expect everyone to pitch in together, unless that decision is made at the government level. Still, while we all have some inherent responsibility to help the poor out of poverty, most of us aren't directly involved in letting them slide into poverty. The people/corporations/groups that *are* at least somewhat responsible for the impoverished have a greater moral responsibility to help them.

Since insufficient income is the biggest enforcer of poverty, that's where most of our spare resources should go. If we assume that 50% of poverty spells begin with a change in income, and 80% of poverty spells end with income (as *The Dynamics of Spells* has found), it's reasonable to assume that sufficiently increasing their income would dramatically decrease the percentage of people falling into poverty, while making sure that most of those who do fall into poverty don't stay there for long. Assuming that a child's poverty is contingent on their parent(s)'s poverty, they're indirectly reliant on income as well. Employers, especially those making excessive amounts of profit at the expense of employee pay, have a particular moral responsibility to pay their employees fairly. From the other end, businesses, especially those making large profits on essential goods, have some moral responsibility to keep their prices down so the poor can afford them. Of course, this goes against the grain of capitalism, but that's another conversation; this is an analysis on moral responsibility.

It is obviously undeniable that many of the impoverished must have at least *some* responsibility for their own poverty, but the data shows that poverty is mostly due to

circumstances that the impoverished have little to no control over. Income, resources, race, birth – the first two of these are difficult to improve, especially when you're working from the bottom. The latter two, obviously, we have no say in the matter. So, I argue that the impoverished are not entirely responsible for their financial situation. We all have some moral obligation to lift the poor if we have the spare resources to do so, but those who had a hand in letting them slip into poverty in the first place are obliged to be the first to reach out.

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