Life Without Hope

Poverty: A General Overview

A picture containing text, road

Description automatically generatedEvery country has its dark and dirty secrets that they would rather never see the light of day, and the United States is no exception. In 2019 and 2020, especially when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, San Francisco's tent cities saturated the nightly news. Tents cities are not new to San Francisco, just like poverty is not new to the United States. The Great Depression saw the U.S. with a historical unemployment rate estimated at more than 20%. With failing banks, no jobs, and no security net to help those in need, millions of Americans fell into poverty (Great Depression History). Because of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's efforts to stabilize the American economy and World War II, the Great Depression came to an end. However, the poverty rate was estimated at 22.4% in 1959 (How Has Poverty Changed Over Time).

One of the many tent cities that have popped up around the nation. Source: Nathan Dumlao/Unsplash

In 1964, President Lydon B. Johnson declared a War on Poverty in his first State of the Union address. After Michael Harrington’s 1962 book, The Other America, raised awareness of America’s poverty issue, President Johnson hoped to make America a more fair and just country with a massive reform program known as the Great Society (Review Essay: 'the Other America' is 'Coming Apart', Lydon B. Johnson). In 1963, Mollie Orshansky, an employee at the Social Security Administration, published her first version of poverty thresholds. President Johnson’s administration adopted Orshansky’s thresholds as a way to measure the War on Poverty (From Hunter to Orshansky: An Overview of (Unofficial) Poverty Lines in the United States from 1904 to 1965). The poverty rate reached an all-time low of 11% in 1973. It then fluctuated between 11% and a high of 15% for the next 37 years. The national poverty rate increased for the fourth straight year in 2010, and 46.2 million people were living in poverty, the largest number in the 52 years since the first published poverty report (How Has Poverty Changed Over Time and Chart, line chart

Description automatically generatedIncome, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010). The poverty rate reached a new all-time low of 10.5% in 2019. However, 2020 ushered in the Covid-19 pandemic, millions lost their jobs, causing great concern among experts (Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2019).

Poverty Rate from 1959 to 2019. Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Poverty Facts

* The United States has one of the highest rates of child poverty among high-income countries.
* In 2019, nearly 35 million people lived below the poverty line in the United States. Of those, 10 million were children.
* The poverty threshold guidelines first developed in 1963 are the same guidelines used today. They are adjusted for inflation.
* Poverty does not discriminate. All races and ethnic groups are affected. By race, the highest child poverty rates are found among Native Americans.
* Children who grow up in poverty face a lifetime of challenges.

Poverty and Children

Life for children living in poverty is devasting. Impoverished children lack food which leads to malnutrition, poor development, and poor health. Their unpredictable circumstances often lead to them developing mental health issues. The low-income communities they live in lack the funds to provide an education equal to their non-poor peers. These children are also more likely to become entangled in the child welfare and criminal justice systems. Factors such as these often lead to these children growing up to continue a seemingly unending cycle of hopelessness. Few children living in poverty ever grow up to break this vicious cycle (The Basic Facts About Children in Poverty).

A street with cars parked on the side and buildings in the background

Description automatically generated with low confidenceJust like child poverty is disproportionately high compared to the total population. Certain groups of children have a higher rate of poverty than others. Native American children have the highest poverty rates, followed by Black and Hispanic children. White and Asian child poverty rates are lower and about the same for both groups (How Has Poverty Changed Over Time and The Population of Poverty USA). Family structures are also associated with different poverty rates. Children from single-parent households are more likely to be poor. Children living in particular geographic locations, such as the Southern U.S. and U.S. territories, are more likely to grow up living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau).

Yazoo City, M.S. by Andrew Morang. Mississippi is the poorest state in the United States.

Education

Education is a way to achieve a better life. However, children who live in poverty do not receive the same educational experiences or have access to the same educational advantages as their non-poor peers. Schools located in poor neighborhoods do not have the funds to provide quality materials and educators for their students. These factors lead to the children receiving a less than adequate education, usually ending with the majority of them never completing high school. This is the first link in the cycle of poverty. Because of their lack of education, they cannot compete in the job market, causing them to settle for low-paying work or not able to secure a job. Such factors lead them to a life of crime and incarceration, leaving their families (if they have one) to fend for themselves (HuffPost). ![Table

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Source: Statistical Abstract of the United States:2010, U.S. Census Bureau. Photo has been edited for size purposes.

Research shows income is greatly influenced by the level of education achieved. As indicated by the table above, a household where the education level of the head of the house was less than 9th grade earned around $20,805, households with a high school graduate head of house earned $40,456, households with a bachelor’s degree earned $77,605, and households headed by a person with a professional degree earned $100,000 or more (U.S. Census Bureau). Research also shows that those with higher levels of education have less of a probability of going to prison.

Chart, histogram

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*Source: Becky Pettit, Bryan Sykes, and Bruce Western. “Technical Report on Revised Population Estimates and NLSY79 Analysis Tables for the Pew Public Safety and Mobility Project” (Harvard University, 2009).*