

# Pushed to the Bottom

The Experience of Poverty in the United States



*Photo Credit: Rucha Chitnis*

This report is dedicated to the memory of

## **Ronald Doyle Anderson**

*activist and co-facilitator, St. Mary's Center, Oakland, CA.*



## **Ron Anderson**

*(June 20, 1954 – June 26, 2018)*

**“I was very fortunate to facilitate a group of people that I had befriended during homeless times, shelter living, transitional housing, and the experience we embrace at St. Mary’s Center that led us to our own housing and how to give back to our community. This became a very emotional experience for me since I have seen this group at its worst and now at its best — giving, and helping. I’m very proud of them but, most of all, I am very grateful to have been part of their participation in these exercises.**

**I may not be around to see the End of Poverty but I know in my heart that one day the living nightmare will be a bad dream that someone will wake from one day.”**

*— Ron Anderson*

# Acknowledgments

---

The U.S. research team thanks everyone who participated in the Multidimensional Aspects of Poverty (MAP) participatory research project. We would not have been able to undertake this project without your time and hard work.

Thank you to the activists, academics, and practitioners who participated in peer groups in Appalachia (southwest Virginia), Boston, Gallup (New Mexico), New Orleans, New York, and Oakland. Your knowledge is the backbone of this participatory research. We are grateful for your time, dedication, and thoughtful input.

Thank you to the MAP location teams for your time and effort in outreach to participants and in organizing and facilitating peer groups. Your dedication has made it possible for this project to be conducted nationwide in both urban and rural areas of the country, allowing us to pursue a better understanding of poverty in all its forms.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to our partners in the MAP U.S. locations. Your support and generous offer of space to conduct peer groups made this project possible.

### **Boston, MA:**

Department of Sociology  
Harvard University

Northeastern Crossing

Project Hope

Bunker Hill Community College

### **Gallup, NM:**

The Adult Education Center  
at University of New Mexico  
North Campus

### **New Orleans, LA:**

Arthur and Bessie Thornton  
for hosting a peer group in their home

Don Everard, Executive Director  
Hope House

### **New York, NY:**

Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)

Department of Sociology  
Columbia University

United Nations

Tompkins Park Senior Center

Chance for Children Youth Information  
Center, Inc. Ebbets Field Pantry

### **Oakland, CA:**

St. Mary's Center

This report was written by Maryann Broxton, Guillaume Charvon, and Dave Meyer in collaboration with the other members of the national research team: Shawn Ashley, Donna Haig Friedman, Amelia Mallona, Julia Sick, Kimberly Tyre, and Marlon Wallen.

All contents copyright 2019 by ATD Fourth World Movement, New York

# What Is It Like to Live in Poverty?

---



Poverty goes much deeper than just income level. Poverty means having to swallow your pride when accessing a much-needed subsidy, knowing that your children are not receiving the same quality education as their peers, being trapped in a run-down community that lacks resources, being told to be grateful for the little bit you do have and being shamed if you are not. These are some of the essential aspects of poverty.

This report presents a unique voice in the discussion of poverty in the United States by combining three types of expertise: knowledge about poverty from academic experts who study it, knowledge from social workers and others who work alongside people living in poverty, and knowledge about poverty from people who experience it every day. For the remainder of this report, we will refer to these groups as academics, practitioners, and activists. "Activists" is the term chosen for themselves by the people living in poverty who designed this research. This word recognizes the ways in which they are active in working to improve their communities and reflects their desire not to be labeled based on their socioeconomic status.

## What Is It Like to Live in Poverty?

Priding itself on the idea that “all men are created equal,” the United States’ founding principles and collective myths play a role in the depth of poverty experienced by people here. The American Dream says anyone who works hard can overcome any obstacle and do well for themselves. In reality though, how many people really manage to leave deep poverty for a decent, stable, and thriving life? For every shining success story, there are countless other stories of people who worked just as hard if not harder, with just as much intelligence and care, and yet who were simply overwhelmed by the multiple crises that constitute life in poverty. The myth of the American Dream glosses over the more common stories in favor of the exceptions. As a result, the discussion about poverty turns again and again to individuals who are blamed and shamed for their situation.

Our research shows that poverty is the result of a process of subjugation, described in more detail throughout this report. This subjugation forces members of one part of society to live in disadvantaged areas where they lack access to basic resources, to suffer ill health, to struggle against work- and employment-related hardships, to have their voice silenced or ignored, to live in exclusion and isolation, and to endure stigma and shame. These different aspects of poverty are intimately intertwined with one another.

As a result, life in poverty is a struggle: not just a struggle to make ends meet, but a struggle against feelings of anger and shame as well as a struggle to resist and to overcome the injustice of poverty. Addressing one aspect of poverty will often impact another, with cause and consequence impossible to disentangle. For example, when people take time to address health issues, they may miss

work and lose their job. Some aspects of poverty substitute for one another, leading to a sense that the harsh realities are inescapable; even if one issue is addressed, there is always something else.

Poverty is characterized by constant uncertainty and by having to choose between the lesser of two evils.

Poverty can be aggravated by racism and other types of discrimination, by the way many institutions treat the time of those at the bottom as worthless, and by the sheer weight of the accumulated aspects of poverty.

Not everything we learned about poverty in this research was negative. Activists talked about the strong sense of camaraderie among people who know what it is to go without. They talked about the love that keeps their families and communities together, and one group even identified love as a key aspect of poverty. Activists talked about volunteering in their communities, expressing themselves through art, and enjoying good times. “It’s not always constant drudgery,” one activist said. “There are good days and bad days. Sometimes you feel like you can breathe a little and some days it’s really, really bad, and you don’t know if you’re going to make it through.”

Above all else, though, the key finding of this report is that poverty is the result of a process of subjugation.

After briefly describing the methodology used to conduct this research, this report goes into greater depth about each of these aspects and the dynamics that perpetuate poverty in the United States today.

# Methodology:

## How Was This Research Conducted?

---

Traditionally, certain types of knowledge are valued while others are dismissed. An insightful comment made by a researcher with an impressive job title has more weight in conversations about poverty than the same comment made by someone who has gained knowledge through direct experience.

As we will see below in the section on unrecognized voice, when people in poverty speak, other people rarely listen. When they share their truth, people often dismiss them because their experiences seem so foreign, so distant from those of the majority of people in our country, that they are considered untrustworthy. This results in the loss of a valuable source of insight and understanding.

The Multidimensional Aspects of Poverty (MAP) research was the U.S. component of an international project conducted from 2016 to 2019 in six countries: Bangladesh, Bolivia, France, Tanzania, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Conceived as a partnership between ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford, this participatory research sought to determine the various aspects of poverty as identified by people who live in poverty every day.







The MAP research used an approach called “Merging Knowledge.” For more than twenty years, ATD Fourth World has used the Merging Knowledge approach in Europe to bring together people with different experiences to engage in dialogue about social issues. The dialogues involve academics; people living in poverty; and teachers, social workers, and others whose occupations engage them with people in poverty. The Merging Knowledge approach involves more than bringing people from different backgrounds together around a table. It creates an environment of mutual trust and respect in which all participants feel that they are on an equal footing. This is achieved by having subgroups of “peers” from similar backgrounds first talk together about a particular topic free from the influence of people from a different background. For people going through the hardships of poverty, the time spent in multi-session peer groups is particularly beneficial. Hearing the ideas and experiences of people who face similar difficulties can be validating and can build personal agency. As a member of the national research team from New York City said, “I didn’t have the words to describe how I felt before, but now I can put the words to those experiences.” Once members of each peer group have discussed their ideas among themselves, they then get together with other peer groups to identify common ideas and lessons.

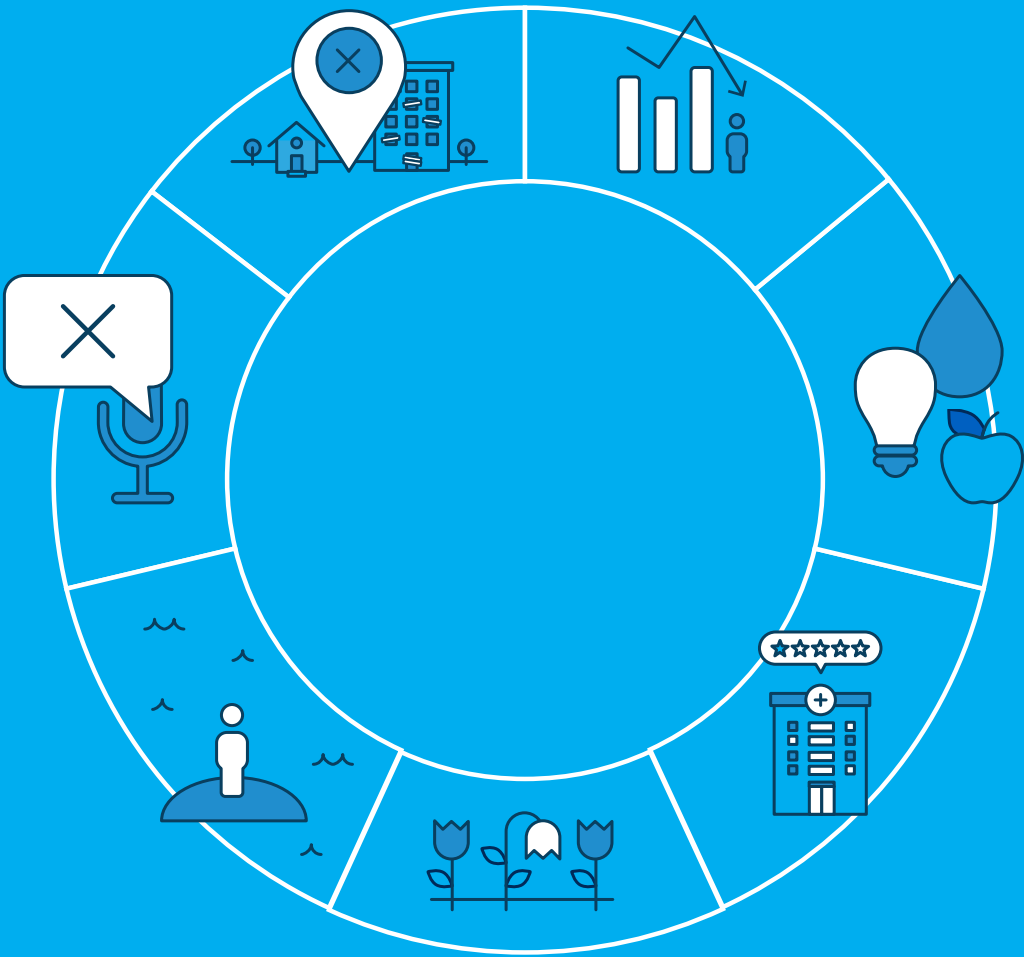
Along with using the Merging Knowledge approach, what made the MAP project unique is that people with an experience of poverty were involved from beginning to end, not as research subjects, but as equal members of the national research team.

In the United States, the national research team had a balance of members who lived in poverty and members who did not. The coordinators deliberately created a team that reflected as much as possible the racial and geographic diversity of the United States and that included members from both rural and urban areas.\*

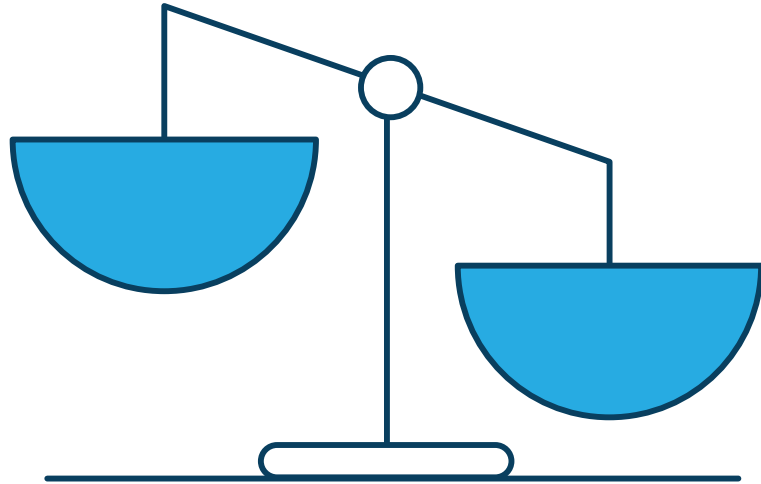
The national research team designed research tools to implement the Merging Knowledge approach in the American context, facilitated peer groups, and analyzed the data from their meetings. A total of twenty-three peer group meetings took place, in Appalachia (southwest Virginia), Boston, Gallup (New Mexico), New Orleans, New York City, and Oakland (California). Following these meetings, the national research team presented its work at a national Merging Knowledge session attended by peer group participants from across the United States. The results are summarized in this report.

\*The demographic makeup of the national research team was: Two African American men, one African American woman, one Native American man, three Caucasian women, one Latina immigrant woman, one Caucasian immigrant man, and one Trinidadian/Indian immigrant man. Six members of the team have a direct experience of poverty, and two identify as LGBTQ. Members of the Oakland practitioner peer group spoke for all when they said, “We are diverse, but we are not divided.”

# The Aspects of Poverty



Poverty is not just a component of individual or family circumstances. It is a complex byproduct of how our society is organized. First and foremost, poverty in the United States is shaped by aspects of our culture and values that create a structural process of subjugation. **None of the aspects of poverty identified here would be present without subjugation.**



## Subjugation

The notion that poverty is merely an economic situation belies the hard truth of what life in poverty is actually like. In fact, there are many arbitrary obstacles placed by our social structures that prevent people in poverty from improving their situation. These obstacles — including failing schools, lack of affordable housing, jobs that provide no benefits, arbitrary rules governing eligibility for social programs, public benches designed to keep homeless people from getting some rest, and many more — are the concrete manifestations of a process that perpetuates poverty in this country and that we are calling subjugation.

“The system,” in the words of one activist from New York, “is not designed for people to evolve out of it. It keeps us in a constant phase of being below.”

In a very real way, the lives of people in poverty are controlled and shaped by forces beyond their individual power to change; that’s subjugation.

“When you live in poverty,” an activist in Boston said, “You are always under somebody’s thumb.”

Subjugation is also what enables the status quo to continue, to the detriment of our whole society. This subjugation happens through our social structures, from how our institutions function (governmental, judicial, educational, corporate, etc.) to how we act, sometimes unwittingly, in our communities as members of the public.

**“You are always under somebody’s thumb.”**

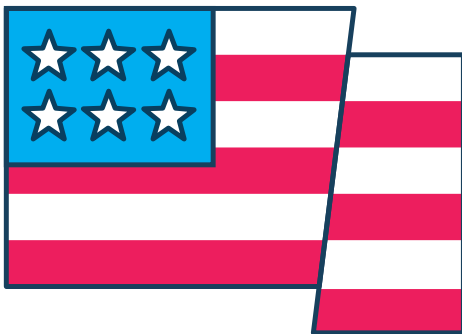
Subjugation is shaped by the cultural and institutional context of the modern United States that makes poverty possible. It is as omnipresent and as difficult to see as the air we breathe. Yet all the other aspects of poverty described in this report wouldn’t exist if we didn’t live in a system that takes it for granted that large segments of our population are unable to meet their basic needs and access their basic rights.

## The Aspects of Poverty

Subjugation manifests itself in many ways. For one, it underlies the way our social safety net functions. Many general pronouncements about poverty focus on the individual and consider an inability to succeed as a personal failing; consequently, people who access social programs are often treated with a lack of respect. For example, it is rare for applicants for social benefits to try to cheat the system, yet many feel they are under suspicion as soon as they walk into an office.

It is odd to talk about subjugation in a country that, as we mentioned above, prides itself on the idea that “all men are created equal.” In reality, of course, that equal opportunity has never been extended to all people.

From the genocide of Native Americans at the hands of European settlers who wanted their land and resources, to slavery, Jim Crow, the school-to-prison pipeline, or poisoned drinking water, people in this country have not experienced and do not experience equal treatment. On the contrary, the ideal of equality has often been used to maintain the status quo, to justify the unfair and unequal privilege of some, and to divert attention from the myriad ways in which disproportionate advantage and power are perpetuated over time.



Racism and sexism are core aspects of subjugation, but not its entirety. Racism, for instance, has impacted the long-term well-being of minority communities. It has divided people living in poverty from one another and prevented them from uniting to claim their rights. Rather than looking clearly at the unfair system that maintains poverty, some public discourse points to minorities or immigrants competing for scarce jobs and has created a culture where scapegoats can be blamed instead. Politicians’ rhetoric contributes to this, but so do ordinary people who have grown up with this perspective.

**“If you don’t consider me worth something, it is easier to take advantage of me.”**

If subjugation continues, it is because we don’t see the common values that are shared among people who live in poverty and those who do not. Words like “those people” were mentioned again and again in our research as hateful phrases that undermine the humanity of people living in poverty. As we will see below, it is this “othering,” this process of subjugation, division, and alienation that allows all the ensuing aspects of poverty to be accepted by society as a whole. In the words of an activist from Boston, “If you don’t consider me worth something, it is easier to take advantage of me.”



## Disadvantaged Areas

Some people are forced to live in specific areas where there is a concentration of hard aspects of life. These areas have failing schools, collapsing infrastructure, high rates of unemployment, little access to healthful food, poor water and air quality, and lack of affordable medical care. Activists described these areas as at the same time over-policed and under-policed: their neighborhoods are home to a heavy law-enforcement presence that leaves residents feeling treated like suspects or criminals; and when residents need help, police intervention is far too often missing.

Living in a physical space where so many challenges are concentrated is consistently identified by activists as one of the biggest frustrations of life in poverty. "They put you in a crappy place," one activist said, "don't give enough services, and 'hopefully' you die in this crappy place because that's all you deserved."

## Work- and Employment-Related Hardships

Many people believe that if people living in poverty would just find a job, everything would be better. In fact, for many people living in poverty, the challenge is not finding a job, but finding a full-time job, or a full-time job that pays a living wage. As an activist in New York said, “We only have access to the jobs that lie at the bottom of society.”

**“We only have access to the jobs that lie at the bottom of society.”**

Work- and employment-related hardships can be caused by, but are not limited to, unemployment and underemployment. The jobs available to people in poverty rarely provide benefits or offer a living wage. Particularly damaging is the impact of zero-hour work: contracts that tie wages to hours worked but do not guarantee a minimum number of hours in a given week. The result is that workers are ineligible for many social programs because they are employed, yet they often cannot know even a day in advance if their job will bring in any actual income.

People living in poverty often do the most low-paying or dangerous jobs that nobody else wants to do, jeopardizing their health and imposing undue wear and tear on their bodies. Academic, practitioner, and activist peer groups reported that the jobs available to people in poverty rarely have a lasting positive impact on life trajectories or provide access to social or professional networks. Trapped in these jobs, workers cannot realize their full potential,

progress in a career or in life, or help open new opportunities for their children or other relatives.

Working at the bottom of the economic ladder, people in poverty are easily replaced and as a result are often treated as if they are disposable, subjected to harsh working conditions, and threatened with being fired if they complain. These conditions create uncertainty and instability in the lives of the working poor. For women in poverty, and especially women of color in poverty, a lifetime of low wages and the gender pay gap often make it impossible to retire.

All these work-related challenges leave people stripped of freedom to improve their lives. They cannot get a better job. They cannot move to a better neighborhood. They cannot afford what their children need. They are simply trapped. In theory, they are free to do any number of things to improve their lot, but in practice these things are beyond their reach.



## Lack of Adequate Health and Well-being

People living in poverty suffer from a lack of access to affordable nutritious food and affordable health, dental, and vision care. In addition, their lives are permeated by a constant toxic stress that takes its toll on both physical and mental health.

In some rural areas, people travel up to one hundred miles and spend days waiting to access basic medical services. To get by, people ignore their illnesses and small health concerns. They rely on home remedies until problems become severe enough to require an emergency room visit. More often than not, the emergency room will send them to seek follow-up care with their primary care physicians, but often there are no primary care doctors in their area, or their insurance doesn't cover follow-up visits, or they can't afford the co-pay. Basic preventive care, like annual check-ups and living a healthy lifestyle, is impossible in many communities in poverty. Even eating well is almost impossible for people in poverty who live in "food deserts" where nutritious food is either unavailable or too expensive for most residents to afford.

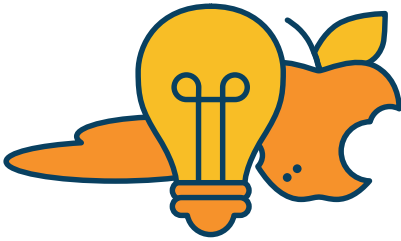
Even when people have health insurance, it rarely includes dental or vision coverage. Poor dental care can leave people enduring chronic pain and multiple tooth extractions, with terrible impacts on their self-esteem. A lack of vision care denies children the glasses they need to succeed in school and prevents adults from getting certain jobs. In theory, people are free to pursue good health, but without the resources or means, that freedom is illusory. For people living in poverty, the freedom to make choices to maintain their health has been taken away.



Poverty both creates and exacerbates mental health issues. Poverty is stressful. The stress of enduring sickness and pain, in combination with constant worry, can cause hopelessness, depression, and chronic anxiety. The stigma associated with mental illness leads many people, particularly in communities of color, to avoid seeking help. In some cases, people suffering from mental health issues self-medicate with drugs or alcohol because affordable mental health services are not available to them.

Health conditions that start in childhood because of poverty are carried into adulthood and persist throughout people's lives as emotional and physical wounds.

## Stigma and Shame



### Resources

Resources are the basic necessities and services needed to live — not merely survive — in a dignified way as an individual, family, and community. In this respect and in many others, as one activist from Oakland put it, “The poorest get the worst.”

**“The resources are just enough to set people up to fail.”**

People living in poverty rarely have access to adequate resources. This includes housing, employment, education, sanitation, quality food, social services, public transportation, natural resources, health care and services, and much more. Practitioners in Appalachia said, “The resources are just enough to set people up to fail.”

One question on any job application is an applicant’s home address. Many activists talked about how that question alone was enough to disqualify them from certain jobs because many employers assume that anyone from a high-poverty neighborhood is probably lazy or dishonest or a troublemaker. That misconception on the prospective employer’s part can cause painful feelings of low self-esteem and shame in people who are rejected because of where they live.

Practitioner, academic, and activist co-researchers highlighted the harmful consequences when people who do not live in poverty judge those who do, imposing a stigma on living in poverty. Stigma and shame are two sides of the same coin. Activists talk about feeling the judgments of others through interpersonal interactions, the way they may be shunned at community events, and the disrespectful attitudes and unnecessary obstacles they face when trying to access the very programs meant to address poverty. Stigma is a form of discrimination. It intersects with other forms of discrimination and exacerbates them. One of our activist co-researchers talked about going to an event where “. . . the wealthy gay shunned the poor gay even though we were all there to support the same cause.”

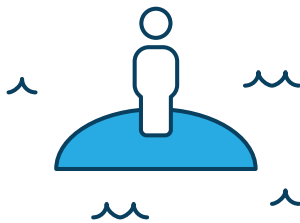




## Social Isolation

Poverty isolates people from one another. “The more you need people,” one activist said, “the less they are here.” It is a vicious cycle. The less support people get, the more they come to feel they don’t deserve to be supported. Exclusion leads to self-isolation.

In a country where poverty is seen as a sign of personal failure, simply being perceived as “poor” is enough for your neighbors to push you away. The stigma of poverty means that if you are poor, people often assume you are lazy, or on drugs, or the embodiment of any of the destructive stereotypes our society imposes on people in poverty. The result is many people at the bottom or near the bottom of society trying to prove “We are not like those people,” and those who most need support are often left without a social network of family and friends they can rely on.



“You start to get depressed,” one activist from Boston said, “and then you don’t want to be involved with people, so you get even more depressed and more isolated.”

“Why do we isolate ourselves?” another activist wondered. “I don’t know, but it is maybe something that keeps poverty rolling. On the other hand, for some of us, isolation is self-preservation, in order not to lose our sanity, our identity. It is to survive and to not completely lose ourselves. It is part of our coping mechanisms too.”



## Unrecognized Voice and Exclusion from Participation

Activists spoke often of growing up with a feeling that people who did not live in poverty didn’t care about them and their troubles; that they didn’t matter. When this feeling is internalized at a young age, people learn not to speak of their hardships. When it is compounded by the stigma endured by people in poverty in common social interactions, it hampers their ability to be advocates for themselves and their families. Whether in the context of meeting with their child’s teachers, engaging with social workers, or talking with elected officials, activists speak of being ignored or unheard to the point where they don’t even bother trying anymore.

When people are consistently ignored, they cannot speak on their own behalf. They cannot participate in the social, economic, political, and cultural life of their communities. They no longer have access to decision-making processes that might lead to effective solutions. Of course, this report demonstrates that people in poverty do have a voice — a strong voice with much to say.

## The Struggle

Trying to get through daily life while confronting the many aspects of poverty is a struggle — a struggle for a better life, a struggle for dignity, and a struggle to get by. Research participants saw this in both a positive and a negative light when they talked about “the struggle” of poverty.

The struggle they talked about is about being “determined not to give up on what you’re striving towards,” as an activist in New York said. People felt a sense of relief when they were successful in this struggle, when they managed to get by, to make it through another day, week, month, or year. Some people would call this “resilience,” but this is a term most activists rejected. They felt that “resilience” means bouncing back from the many difficult situations they face every day, suggesting that a person who can’t bounce back confirms the negative stereotypes about people in poverty: lazy, immoral, and responsible for their own struggle and failure.

In the midst of this struggle to get by, there is also an internal struggle: the struggle for inner balance and peace while coping with the resentment caused by poverty. For many people in poverty, this resentment stems from having to accept the injustice of poverty and being expected to submit to it. People in poverty reported that they are often told to be grateful for the resources they have, even when these are limited and of poor quality. They felt that they were always expected to adapt and change, when in fact there need to be changes in the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty. This is the final sense of “struggle” — the struggle to resist the daily subjugation that people living in poverty are forced to endure.



From “subjugation” to “the struggle,” these aspects capture how poverty is experienced in the United States today. They clearly overlap and interact. Living in disadvantaged areas imposes a social stigma on people and causes others to treat them differently based only on their address. A lack of adequate health and well-being limits the options for employment. When politicians and community leaders do not listen, it is hard for people in poverty to advocate for improved resources where they live. These are just a few of the ways that these various aspects of poverty interact. The next section presents some of the traits (the constants) that are present in all the aspects described and some external factors that serve to aggravate the severity of poverty (the aggravators).

# The Constants:

## Uncertainty and Hard Choices

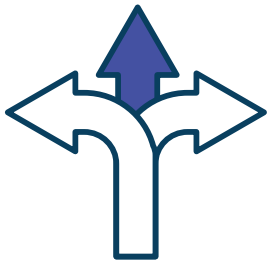
---

There are certain constants that pertain to each of the aspects of poverty presented above. These are:



### Uncertainty:

Uncertainty is a daily fact of life in poverty. For many people it is experienced as waking up in the morning and not knowing what the day will bring and where you will find what you need to get by. In the words of an academic in Boston, "Any hiccup in your day will be bigger for someone in poverty than for someone not in poverty." An unexpected illness or a week without income can start off a string of challenges in a downward spiral that is hard to escape.



### Hard Choices:

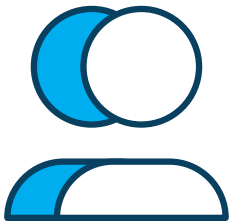
People in poverty are often accused of making poor choices. In reality the only options available to people struggling to overcome multiple hardships will often have dire, sometimes catastrophic, results. They lack the freedom to make a good choice. Parents participating in the research talked about having to choose between buying food for their family, getting a winter coat for their children, or fixing the truck to go to work. Going without any of these items could be seen as neglect and result in them losing their job or having their children taken from them. "Our choices are only ever dire," one parent said. "It feels like we have no choices at all."

# The Aggravators:

## Racism, Social Identities, Time, and the Accumulation of Poverty

---

Racism, social identities, time, and the accumulation of the aspects described in this report are aggravators — they make poverty even worse.



### Racism:

People suffering racial discrimination will always have a harder experience of poverty. Racism is so closely linked to subjugation in this country that it can be difficult to separate them.

Also, the microaggressions and daily indignities faced by minority communities add to the stress of poverty. They make people feel unwelcome in certain public places and impact their ability not only to access the services they need to survive, but also to advance economically and reach their full potential. These microaggressions sometimes leave people feeling like they're being watched. As a result they come to change their behavior in order not to draw suspicion — keeping their hands in their pockets while in stores, for example, so as not to be accused of shoplifting.



### Social Identities:

Other social identities beyond race, such as gender, immigration status, or sexual orientation can also compound the discrimination experienced by people living in poverty. Each new layer of identity ostracizes people more, creating a vicious cycle. A person is perceived as not just a woman, but a woman living in poverty; not just a transgender teen, but a homeless transgender teen; not just a Native American, but an unemployed Native American.



## Time:

Time is also an aggravator. How long has someone been living in poverty? Weeks? Months? Generations? The longer people have been living in a disadvantaged area, struggling with substandard health care, and having their voice ignored, the harsher the impact those aspects of poverty have in their lives. The physical and mental health issues caused by poverty can persist throughout a lifetime and have the greatest effect of all: a shorter lifespan. As an activist in New Orleans put it, “You die sooner.”

People in poverty have a hard time planning long term — making it to the end of the month, for example — because they are constantly dealing with the immediacy of surviving the “now” — or making it through the day.

Finally, activists talked of feeling that their time is not valued by others. They tell of being turned away from access to basic services because of paperwork issues and of constantly being told to come back another day. Many people assume that those without jobs have limitless free time. In fact, however, when people are in dire need of a resource, time is limited and precious. A delay in receiving assistance can prevent people from finding housing, for example, starting a job, or taking care of their health.

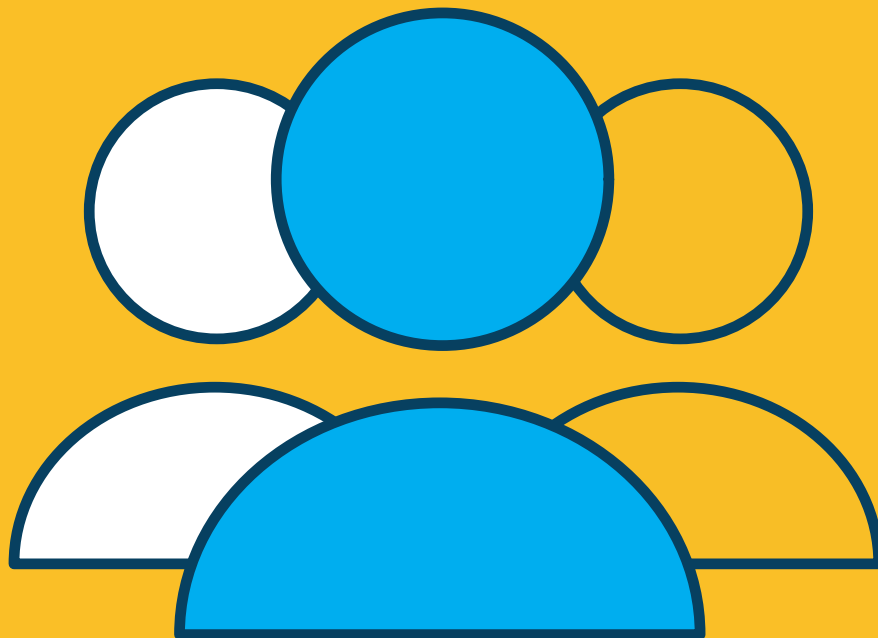


## The Accumulation of Aspects:

The final aggravator is the accumulation of these various aspects of poverty. The more numerous the individual aspects of poverty there are in a person’s life, the harsher the daily experience of poverty will be. In addition, these aspects of poverty exacerbate one another. For example, it is harder for people who live in a disadvantaged area to find a job or to change jobs.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

---



## Conclusion and Recommendations

In the work of identifying the aspects of poverty presented in this report, we realized that poverty results from a structural process. When you live in poverty, in the words of one activist, “You are always under somebody’s thumb.” Rather than having control over their own lives, people find themselves trapped. “You’re put in a situation,” another activist said, “and then blamed for this situation.” And an activist in New York said, “Poverty is not caused by us. Poverty is given to us; we were placed in poverty.”

As a result of this process, which we call subjugation, people in poverty are forced to live in disadvantaged areas where they lack access to basic resources, they suffer ill health, they struggle against work- and employment-related hardships, they have their voice silenced or ignored, they live in exclusion and isolation, and they endure stigma and shame.

As these aspects of poverty accumulate and aggravate one another, life becomes a struggle: not just a struggle to make ends meet, but a struggle against feelings of anger and shame as well as a struggle to resist and to overcome the injustice of poverty.

We have seen that poverty is the result of cultural and social forces interacting; it is not just an accident in a person’s life or in a family’s circumstances.

**How can we go forward to end poverty?** The aspects of poverty identified in this report provide a basis for developing innovative approaches in the United States. This is not to say that we should abandon existing efforts to find solutions, but rather that these aspects invite us to be more creative in what we do. There is a growing awareness in the United States of the importance of racial and ethnic diversity, and this gives us great hope although there is still much work to be done in that area. Because racism and poverty are deeply connected in this country, we need to make sure that as we work to build a more inclusive future, a priority is given to people living in poverty and social isolation.

We hope the description of our methodology can serve as a reference for best practices in addressing poverty. In order to overcome poverty, we need a comprehensive approach, conceived and designed with people living in poverty. People who work to end poverty need to create spaces like those we used to conduct this research, where people in poverty can speak for themselves, in dialogue with others.

Finally, our approach demonstrates that if practitioners, policymakers, and academics want to build real partnerships with people living in poverty, they will find dynamic partners who are ready to be part of building a more just society. Poverty is not inevitable.

**To overcome it, we must all work together.**



ATD Fourth World Movement overcomes the injustices of persistent poverty and social exclusion by bringing together people from all walks of life, learning from people who face poverty every day, and running family and community projects.

We're building a movement of people all across the country to act together to change how poverty is understood. The first step is learning from people who live poverty every day. So please, download the report and share your thoughts and ideas at [4thworldmovement.org](http://4thworldmovement.org).

For readers who wish to explore this research in greater depth, a more comprehensive account is available online at [map.4thworldmovement.org](http://map.4thworldmovement.org).



*This document was financed with support from the Agence Française de Développement.  
The ideas and opinions contained herein do not necessarily represent those of the AFD.*