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An Examination of Poverty: Dimensions, Causes, and Solutions

David Nii O. Tackie
Tuskegee University, dtackie@tuskegee.edu

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David Nii Tackie
Tuskegee University

ABSTRACT
This article, based on the 2021 Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) Presidential Address, assesses the dimensions, causes of, and solutions to poverty. It finds that the definition of poverty varies based on the criteria used, and even by which agency or institution is defining it. It also finds that poverty indices vary by state and by county. For instance, in selected SRSA states, Virginia has the lowest poverty rate and Mississippi has the highest poverty rate. There are several causes of poverty, some of which are lower levels of education, lower levels of health, unemployment, lack of livable wages, and the influence of other socioeconomic factors. Suggested solutions to minimizing poverty include government assistance programs, effective minimum wage policies, job creation, responsible behavior, and responsible policies. Overall, efforts to encourage education, improve access to healthcare, and improve shelter, among others, to boost income levels and standard of living are necessary to make ample progress. However, individual responsibility is also important.

KEYWORDS
Causes of poverty, dimensions of poverty, poverty, solutions to poverty

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a complex issue and it affects many communities across the world. Of course, it is the less privileged that suffer the effects of poverty the most. Generally, it is believed that the effects of poverty could be reduced or minimized. However, wholly eliminating it is up for debate. Above all, poverty cuts across several dimensions, such as health status, educational status, occupational status, or residential status. The main difficulty of dealing with poverty is the lack of resources to manage oneself, family, or community. Chen (2019:1) defines poverty as “a state or condition in which a person or community lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living. Poverty means that the income level from employment is so low that basic human needs cannot be met." Dunning, Ledbetter, and Whorton (2003) also indicate that there is a monetary threshold, for instance, for an individual or a family of four, below which they are considered to be in poverty. When it comes to a community, Dunning et al. (2003:5) use a county as their example; they emphasize that a poor county is one "in which a high percentage of residents live in poverty over a long period of time." Frohlich, Sauter, and Kent (2018) contend that, poverty, if not dealt with properly, could persist for a long time. It can be transferred across generations, and can take hold on the minds of individuals or families who are in or near poverty.

According to Chen (2019), people in poverty usually do not have adequate access to housing, clean water, healthy food, and healthcare. He stresses that every country has its own benchmarks that help gauge what proportion of its citizens live in poverty. Thus, Kenton (2018:1) views poverty from the perspective of the international poverty line, which is a "monetary threshold under which an individual is considered to be living in poverty." Kenton explains that the international poverty line is calculated based on the poverty threshold for each nation and this is converted to dollars. The World Bank determines the poverty line, based on the changes in basic cost of living for food, clothing, and shelter around the world. It originally set this to $1 per day. However, in 2008, it adjusted the poverty line to $1.25 per day; in 2015, it adjusted the line to $1.90 per day.

In the U.S., the Census Bureau is responsible for measures of poverty. The Bureau (2019a):

> [U]ses a set of monetary income thresholds that may vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. If a family's total income is less than the family's threshold, then that family and every individual in it is considered in poverty. The official poverty thresholds do not vary geographically, but they are updated for inflation using the CPI [Consumer Price Index]. The official poverty definition uses money before taxes and does not include capital gains, or noncash benefits such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps. (P. 1)

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) issues poverty guidelines. There is a difference between the two. USDHHS (2020) distinguishes the two this way:

> The poverty thresholds are the original version of the federal poverty measure. They are updated each year by the Census Bureau. The thresholds are mainly used for statistical purposes; for instance, preparing estimates of the number of Americans in poverty each year. The poverty guidelines are the other version of the poverty measure. They are issued each year by the Department of Health and Human Services. The guidelines are a simplification of the poverty thresholds for use for administrative purposes. (P. 4)

It further states that (USDHHS 2020):

> The poverty guidelines (unlike the poverty thresholds) are designated by the year in which they are issued. For instance, the guidelines issued in 2020 are designated the 2020 poverty guidelines. However, the 2020 poverty guidelines only reflect price changes through calendar year 2019; accordingly, they are approximately equal to the Census Bureau poverty thresholds for calendar year 2019. (P. 4)

Frohlich et al. (2018:4) also mention the four alternative measures of poverty. Notable among them are the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) (developed by the Census Bureau in 2011, to gauge a more realistic view of the poverty level), family-based measurements developed by the Economic Policy Institute, relative poverty threshold, and locally developed or generated poverty rates. SPM considers resources received through five channels; specifically, noncash government assistance programs; food, clothing, shelter, and utilities expenditures; income after tax payments and credits; work and medical expenses; and child support payments. Comparatively, the regular poverty rate was 12.3 percent vs. 13.0 percent in the U.S. for the SPM in 2017; the regular poverty rate was 11.8 percent vs. 12.8 percent for the SPM in 2018; and the regular poverty rate was 10.5 percent vs. 11.7 percent for the SPM in 2019 (Fox 2020; Fox 2019; Semega et al. 2020). The family budget-based measurements also assess the costs of five basic family budget items such as housing, food, childcare, transportation, and taxes. In other words, it considers “income needed to live a ‘safe and decent’, yet modest, living standards” (Frohlich et al. 2018:4). The relative poverty threshold measure is pegged to a percentage of current median income levels. It is common in the European Union (Frohlich et al. 2018:4). The locally developed or generated poverty rates take into account the poverty rate in the particular locality.

This article focuses on examining the dimensions, causes of, and solutions to poverty. In some aspects, it focuses on the South, but in others, it takes a panoramic view of the issue. The rest of the article has six sections, namely, state specific information, state specific county information, causes, who lives in poverty and consequences of poverty, solutions, and conclusion.

STATE SPECIFIC INFORMATION

This section examines child poverty rate and state poverty rate; annual cost of living and median family income; average household income and median household income; and poverty lines by family size.

Table 1: Child Poverty Rate and State Poverty Rate, 2018 (U.S. Rankings Reported in Parentheses)

State	Child Poverty Rate (%)	State Poverty Rate (%)	State	Child Poverty Rate (%)	State Poverty Rate (%)
Alabama	23.8 (6th highest)	16.8 (7th highest)	North Carolina	20.2 (13th highest)	14.0 (14th highest)
Arkansas	24.7 (4th highest)	17.2 (5th highest)	Oklahoma	21.7 (10th highest)	15.6 (8th highest)
Florida	19.7 (15th highest)	13.6 (12th highest)	South Carolina	22.6 (8th highest)	15.3 (10th highest)
Georgia	20.5 (12th highest)	14.3 (12th highest)	Tennessee	22.3 (9th highest)	15.3 (9th highest)
Kentucky	23.0 (7th highest)	16.9 (6th highest)	Texas	21.1 (11th highest)	14.9 (11th highest)
Louisiana	26.2 (3rd highest)	18.6 (3rd highest)	Virginia	13.7 (14th highest)	10.7 (12th highest)
Mississippi	27.8 (highest)	19.7 (highest)	West Virginia	24.5 (5th highest)	17.8 (4th highest)

Source: Frohlich (2019). Table formatting by author.

Child Poverty Rate and State Poverty Rate[2]

Child poverty and state poverty are important indices of poverty as a whole. Poverty affects children in the different states in various ways, and state poverty reveals different information in the various states. Frohlich (2019) reports on child poverty rate and also state poverty rate in every state, based on the 2018 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau. Overall, the state with the highest child poverty rate and state poverty rate is Mississippi. These rates are, respectively, 27.8 percent and 19.7 percent. The state with the lowest child poverty rate is Utah, 9.5 percent, and the state with lowest state poverty rate is New Hampshire, 7.6 percent. The rates for selected Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) states, are reported in Table 1. Again, Mississippi has the highest child poverty rate and state poverty rate. Virginia has the lowest child poverty rate and state poverty rate, respectively, 13.7 percent and 10.7 percent.

Annual Cost of Living and Median Family Income

Cost of living and median family income are also related to poverty; they determine how a family lives and what the family can afford. Sauter (2019) reports on cost of living estimates for the various states for 2018 based on the Economic Policy Institute's Family Budget Calculator. The estimates are for a family of two (i.e., two adults with no children). The costs comprise estimates for basic necessities to lead to a "decent" life, including things such as food, housing, transportation, health care, and taxes. Sauter also reports the median family income needed for the aforementioned family. Overall, the state with the highest annual cost of living is Hawaii, at $66,352, and the state with the highest median family income is Massachusetts, at $101,548. The state with the lowest cost of living is Arkansas, at $42,991 and the state with the lowest median family income is Mississippi, at $57,380. The rates for selected SRSA states, are reported in Table 2. Virginia has the highest annual cost of living and median family income, respectively, $55,993 and $88,929. Arkansas has the lowest annual cost of living, at $42,991 and Mississippi has the lowest median family income, at $57,380.

Table 2: Annual Cost of Living and Median Family Income, 2018 (U.S. Rankings Reported in Parentheses)

State	Annual Cost Living ($)	Median Family Income ($)	State	Annual Cost Living ($)	Median Family Income ($)
Alabama	48,005 (19th lowest)	63,837 (7th lowest)	North Carolina	52,857 (14th highest)	67,816 (13th highest)
Arkansas	42,991 (the lowest)	58,080 (3rd lowest)	Oklahoma	48,265 (21st lowest)	64,082 (8th lowest)
Florida	49,914 (24th highest)	66,995 (12th lowest)	South Carolina	49,466 (25th lowest)	65,742 (10th lowest)
Georgia	53,437 (22nd highest)	71,457 (18th highest)	Tennessee	47,398 (18th highest)	65,656 (9th lowest)
Kentucky	43,661 (4th lowest)	62,228 (6th lowest)	Texas	46,717 (13th lowest)	71,868 (20th lowest)
Louisiana	48,181 (20th lowest)	61,847 (7th lowest)	Virginia	55,993 (9th highest)	88,929 (10th highest)
Mississippi	46,141 (8th lowest)	57,380 (the lowest)	West Virginia	48,704 (22nd lowest)	57,718 (2nd lowest)

Source: Sauter (2019). Table formatting by author.

Average Annual Household Income and Median Household Income

Worker or employee income in the U.S. provides a picture of how much workers are taking home, which is tied to the poverty rate of the family. Csiszar (2020) reports on “average” worker income in the various states of the U.S., based on five-year estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2018 American Community Survey. Generally, higher costs go with higher “average” income, and lower costs go with lower “average” income. Overall, the “state” with the highest average annual household income is the District of Columbia, at $121,698, and the “state” with the highest median household income is also the District of Columbia, at $82,604. The state with the lowest average annual household income is Mississippi, at $60,640, and the state with the lowest median household income is also Mississippi, at $43,567. “Average” incomes in selected SRSA states, are reported in Table 3. Virginia has the highest average annual household income and highest median household income, respectively, $98,847 and

$70,116. As already indicated, Mississippi has lowest average annual household income and lowest median household income.

Table 3: Average Household Income and Median Household Income, 2018, (U.S. Rankings Reported in Parentheses)

State	Average Household Income ($)	Median Household Income ($)	State	Average Household Income ($)	Median Household Income ($)
Alabama	67,243	48,486	North Carolina	73,753	52,413
Arkansas	64,272	45,726	Oklahoma	70,262	51,424
Florida	76,652	53,267	South Carolina	70,093	51,015
Georgia	78,574	55,679	Tennessee	71,458	50,972
Kentucky	67,110	48,392	Texas	84,221	59,570
Louisiana	68,832	47,942	Virginia	98,847	70,116
Mississippi	60,640	43,567	West Virginia	61,225	44,921

Source: Csiszar (2020). Table formatting by author.

Poverty Lines by Family Size

State poverty line analysis can also reveal living standards of residents. Anderson (2020) reports on analysis conducted by GoBankingRates on actual poverty lines for different family sizes (up to 5 persons) in the various states, taking into consideration cost of living. The poverty lines for selected SRSA states, are reported in Table 4. Virginia has the highest poverty lines for all types of households, respectively, $12,752 for one-person household, $17,265 for two-person household, $21,778 for three-person household, $26,291 for four-person household, and $30,804 for five-person household. On the flip side, Mississippi has the lowest poverty lines for all types of households, respectively, $10,704 for one-person household, $14,492 for 2-person household, $18,280 for three-person household, $22,068 for four-person household, and $25,856 for five-person household.

Looking at all the above indicators -- child poverty rate and state poverty rate; annual cost of living and median family income; average household income and median household income; and poverty lines by family size for selected SRSA states, Virginia and Mississippi are usually on “exact” opposite sides and the other states are in between.

Table 4: Poverty Line by Family Size, 2018

State	Actual Poverty Line for 1-Person Household	Actual Poverty Line for 2-Person Household	Actual Poverty Line for 3-Person Household	Actual Poverty Line for 4-Person Household	Actual Poverty Line for 5-Person Household
Alabama	10,829	14,661	18,493	22,325	26,157
Arkansas	10,804	14,627	18,450	22,274	26,097
Florida	12,478	16,893	21,309	25,724	30,140
Georgia	11,553	15,642	19,730	23,819	27,907
Kentucky	10,979	14,864	18,749	22,634	26,519
Louisiana	11,253	15,236	19,218	23,201	27,183
Mississippi	10,704	14,492	18,280	22,068	25,856
North Carolina	11,403	15,439	19,474	23,510	27,545
Oklahoma	11,116	15,050	18,984	22,918	26,851
South Carolina	11,291	15,287	19,282	23,278	27,274
Tennessee	11,291	15,287	19,282	23,276	27,274
Texas	12,115	16,403	20,690	24,978	29,265
Virginia	12,752	17,265	21,778	26,291	30,804
West Virginia	10,866	14,712	18,557	22,403	26,248

Source: Anderson (2020). Table formatting by author.

STATE SPECIFIC COUNTY INFORMATION

The U.S. Census Bureau, 2019, via its indexmundi and Quickfacts link reports the poverty rates[2] for all states and counties in the U.S. Among the selected SRSA states, Virginia has the lowest poverty rate, at 10.7 percent, and Mississippi has the highest poverty rate, at 19.7 percent. Regarding counties in the states, East Carroll Parish, Louisiana, has the highest poverty rate, at 45.7 percent, and Loudoun County, Virginia, has the lowest poverty rate, at 3.6 percent. However, this section examines state specific county information in detail on seven of the selected states in the SRSA region, based on the author's preferences. These states are Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas. Particular counties are selected because of their high rates.

Alabama

The Center for Business and Economic Research (2020) identifies 17 counties in Alabama as comprising the Alabama Black Belt region. These counties are Barbour, Bullock, Butler, Choctaw, Crenshaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Montgomery, Perry, Pike, Russell, Sumter, and Wilcox. According to the Governor's Task Force (2001), these counties, among others, have abysmal statistics, and have high unemployment rates, low personal incomes, high poverty rates, and low educational attainment levels. The situation in most of these counties has not improved much over the years. They had some of the highest poverty rates in the state as of 2018 (Table 5). In fact, 13 of these counties are among the top 15 counties with the highest poverty rates in the state; 14 of them are among the top 20 counties with the highest poverty rates in the state, and all 17 are among the top 36 counties with the highest poverty rates in the state. Sixteen of them have poverty rates of over 20 percent, and all 17 have poverty rates of more than 19 percent. Overall, about 25 percent (17/67 total counties) of the Black Belt Counties are among counties with the highest poverty rates in the state, a sizeable proportion. Bullock County has the highest poverty rate of 42.5 percent (Table 5), and Shelby County has the lowest poverty rate of 8.0 percent (not shown in Table). The state's poverty rate is 16.8 percent.

Table 5: Poverty Rates in Selected Counties of Alabama, 2018

Entity/County	Poverty Rate	Entity/County	Poverty Rate
U.S.	11.8	Clarke	22.8
Alabama	16.8	Choctaw	22.1
Bullock	42.5	Monroe	21.9
Perry	35.3	Bibb	21.8
Sumter	34.7	Russell	21.7
Wilcox	33.4	Dekalb	21.3
Dallas	31.4	Geneva	21.3
Barbour	30.9	Mobile	20.8
Macon	30.2	Marion	20.2
Greene	30.1	Montgomery	20.1
Hale	25.6	Covington	19.9
Lowndes	25.1	Jackson	19.7
Butler	24.5	Randolph	19.7
Conecuh	24.4	Tallapoosa	19.7
Marengo	24.0	Calhoun	19.5
Escambia	23.6	Crenshaw	19.5
Pike	23.6	Lawrence	19.3
Fayette	23.5	Talladega	19.3
Pickens	23.1	Lee	19.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2019b). Table formatting by author.

Florida

Table 6 shows poverty rates in selected counties of Florida. Three counties have poverty rates above 25 percent; 21 of the counties have poverty rates above 20 percent. This implies that nearly 31 percent (21/67 total counties) of the counties are among counties with poverty rates of higher than 20 percent. Hamilton County has the highest poverty rate of 27.6 percent (Table 6), and St. Johns County has the lowest poverty rate of 6.6 percent (not shown in Table). The state's poverty rate is 13.6 percent.

Table 6: Poverty Rates in Selected Counties of Florida, 2018

Entity/County	Poverty Rate	Entity/County	Poverty Rate
U.S.	11.8	Taylor	21.6
Florida	13.6	Okeechobee	21.5
Hamilton	27.6	Calhoun	21.3
Hardee	27.0	Lafayette	21.0
Desoto	26.1	Highlands	20.8
Dixie	24.7	Leon	20.7
Hendry	24.0	Union	20.6
Holmes	23.9	Gulf	20.3
Liberty	23.8	Glades	20.1
Gadsden	23.6	Alachua	19.8
Jackson	23.5	Bradford	19.5
Franklin	22.8	Suwannee	19.3
Madison	22.8	Putnam	18.8
Washington	22.8		

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2019c). Table formatting by author.

Georgia

Table 7 reflects poverty rates in selected counties of Georgia. Thirty-five counties have poverty rates above 25 percent; many more have poverty rates above 20 percent (not shown in Table). This means that about 22 percent (35/159 total counties) of the counties are among counties with poverty rates of more than 25 percent. Wheeler County has the highest poverty rate of 39.6 percent (Table 7), and Fayette and Forsyth counties jointly have the lowest poverty rates of 5.0 percent each (not shown in Table). The state's poverty rate is 14.3 percent.

Table 7: Poverty Rates in Selected Counties of Georgia, 2018

Entity/County	Poverty Rate	Entity/County	Poverty Rate
U.S.	11.8	Evans	26.6
Georgia	14.3	Dodge	26.5
Wheeler	39.6	Early	26.5
Stewart	37.9	Treutlen	26.3
Calhoun	37.2	Ben Hill	26.2
Telfair	31.9	Atkinson	26.1
Jenkins	31.8	Lowndes	25.9
Randolph	30.8	Screven	25.9
Wilcox	30.8	Washington	25.9
Hancock	30.7	Clinch	25.8
Macon	30.5	Sumter	25.7
Johnson	30.0	Warren	25.7
Clay	29.8	Charlton	25.6
Dougherty	29.5	Tattnall	25.6
Mitchell	29.3	Quitman	25.5
Dooly	29.1	Seminole	25.4
Turner	27.9	Emanuel	25.1
Terrell	27.8	Toombs	24.9
Crisp	27.4	Talbot	24.8
Clarke	27.0	Bibb	24.7

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2019d). Table formatting by author.

Kentucky

In Kentucky, 30 of the counties have poverty rates of 25 percent or above (Table 8); many have poverty rates above 20 percent (not shown in Table). This means exactly 25 percent (30/120 total counties) of the counties are among counties with poverty rates of 25 percent or higher. According to Estep (2017), nine of the 30 poorest counties in the U.S. are in Eastern Kentucky. They are Owsley, Clay, Martin, McCreary, Knox, Lee, Bell, Knott, and Harlan. All these counties are in Table 8. Owsley County has the highest poverty rate of 39.2 percent (Table 8), and Olden County has the lowest poverty rate of 5.6 percent (not shown in Table). The state’s poverty rate is 16.9 percent.

Table 8: Poverty Rates in Selected Counties of Kentucky, 2018

Entity/County	Poverty Rate	Entity/County	Poverty Rate
U.S.	11.8	Perry	28.9
Kentucky	16.9	Magoffin	28.4
Owsley	39.2	Wayne	28.1
Martin	39.1	Morgan	27.3
Clay	38.2	Jackson	26.5
Lee	34.4	Menifee	26.4
Floyd	34.2	Casey	26.0
McCreary	33.7	Clinton	25.7
Harlan	33.4	Whitley	25.7
Breathitt	32.5	Lawrence	25.5
Knott	32.1	Estill	25.3
Knox	31.9	Elliott	25.2
Wolfe	31.4	Lewis	25.2
Bell	31.3	Johnson	25.0
Carter	31.1	Adair	23.8
Letcher	31.1	Pike	23.8
Leslie	30.8	Cumberland	23.3
Fulton	30.2	Metcalfe	23.3

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2019e). Table formatting by author.

Mississippi

In Mississippi, 29 of the counties have poverty rates of over 25 percent (Table 9); many more have poverty rates above 20 percent (not shown in Table). This implies that approximately 35 percent (29/82 total counties) of the counties are among counties with poverty rates of higher than 25 percent. Short et al. (2014) identify the Mississippi Delta as region with high poverty rates. This region comprises 18 counties: Bolivar, Carroll, Coahoma, Desoto, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Panola, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tate, Tunica, Warren, Washington, and Yazoo. Thirteen of the 18 appear in Table 9. Issaquena County has the highest poverty rate of 40.5 percent (Table 9), and Desoto County has the lowest poverty rate of 9.0 percent (not shown in Table). The state’s poverty rate is 19.7 percent.

North Carolina

In North Carolina, five of the counties have poverty rates of over 25 percent; 23 have poverty rates above 20 percent (Table 10). This implies that 5 percent (5/100 total counties) of the counties are among counties with poverty rates of higher than 25 percent, and 23 percent (23/100 total counties) of the counties are among counties with poverty rates of higher than 20 percent. Bladen County has the highest poverty rate of 29.1 percent (Table 10), and Union County has the lowest poverty rate of 7.0 percent (not shown in Table). The state's poverty rate is 14.0 percent.

Table 9: Poverty Rates in Selected Counties of Mississippi, 2018

Entity/County	Poverty Rate	Entity/County	Poverty Rate
U.S.	11.8	Wilkinson	30.3
Mississippi	19.7	Adams	29.4
Issaquena	40.5	Bolivar	29.4
Quitman	37.6	Noxubee	29.0
Yazoo	37.1	Kemper	27.5
Humphreys	37.0	Oktibbeha	27.3
Claiborne	36.3	Marion	27.2
Coahoma	35.9	Neshoba	26.9
Jefferson	35.5	Copiah	26.5
Leflore	35.1	Covington	26.5
Sharkey	33.6	Tunica	26.5
Tallahatchie	33.4	Jefferson Davis	26.0
Holmes	33.2	Lauderdale	25.5
Sunflower	32.6	Scott	25.5
Washington	32.6	Leake	25.4
Pike	30.6	Forrest	24.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2019f). Table formatting by author.

Table 10: Poverty Rates in Selected Counties of North Carolina, 2018

Entity/County	Poverty Rate	Entity/County	Poverty Rate
U.S.	11.8	Northampton	21.4
North Carolina	14.0	Watauga	21.2
Bladen	29.1	Washington	21.1
Scotland	26.9	Wilson	21.1
Vance	26.3	Anson	20.5
Columbus	25.3	Duplin	20.4
Tyrrell	25.2	Martin	20.3
Robeson	24.5	Wayne	20.2
Bertie	23.5	Richmond	19.9
Greene	23.5	Warren	19.8
Hertford	23.2	Cleveland	19.1
Pitt	23.2	Rutherford	19.1
Edgecombe	22.9	Graham	18.9
Sampson	22.2	Wilkes	18.9
Hyde	22.2	Cherokee	18.8
Lenoir	22.1	Alleghany	18.7
Halifax	22.0		

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2019g). Table formatting by author.

Texas

In Texas, 18 of the counties have poverty rates of 25 percent or above; 45 of them have poverty rates above 20 percent (Table 11). This means approximately 7 percent (18/254 total counties) of the counties are among counties with poverty rates of 25 percent or above, and 18 percent (45/254 total counties) of the counties are among counties with poverty rates of higher than 20 percent. Ura (2016) reports that five of Texas's poorest counties are in the Rio Grande Valley of the Texas-Mexico border. He names Willacy, Starr, Cameron, Hidalgo, and Zapata counties as counties in this category. All five counties are in Table 11, and they all have poverty rates of more than 25 percent. Willacy County has the highest poverty rate of 35 percent (Table 11), and Loving County has the lowest poverty rate of 3.3 percent (not shown in Table). The state's poverty rate is 14.9 percent.

Table 11: Poverty Rates in Selected Counties of Texas, 2018

Entity/County	Poverty Rate	Entity/County	Poverty Rate
U.S.	11.8	Brazos	23.2
Texas	14.9	Haskell	23.1
Willacy	35.0	Dawson	22.9
Starr	33.2	Uvalde	22.9
Zapata	32.1	Presidio	22.4
Zavala	32.0	Terry	22.4
Brooks	31.0	Newton	22.3
Hidalgo	30.0	Limestone	22.2
La Salle	29.6	San Augustine	22.2
Cameron	27.9	Edwards	22.1
Frio	27.5	Jones	22.0
Bee	26.6	Cochran	21.9
Concho	26.1	Marion	21.9
Houston	26.1	Karnes	21.7
Walker	26.1	Falls	21.6
Maverick	25.9	Reeves	21.5
Webb	25.7	Mitchell	21.4
Duval	25.5	Childress	21.2
Jim Hagg	25.2	Cottle	21.2
Kleberg	25.0	Kinney	21.1
Dimmit	24.6	Floyd	21.0
Garza	24.6	Howard	20.6
Hall	24.1	Shelby	20.6
Crosby	23.7		

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2019h). Table formatting by author.

CAUSES

The key question to be asked is, what causes poverty? Fay (2020) sees four causes of poverty in the U.S. They are (1) lower levels of education, (2) lower levels of health, (3) inability to obtain healthy affordable food, and (4) living in generally high crime areas. According to him, for lower levels of education, “the less advanced one’s education, the less the likelihood of achieving a more secure economic life” (2020:6). Pertaining to lower levels of health, he argues that the lower the income, the lower the health status. Examining the inability to obtain healthy affordable food, he contends that people in poverty have poorer diets; also, they have a lower intake of, for example, fruits and vegetables, and have higher intake of “junk food.” For living in high crime areas, the author admits that the relationship between poverty and crime is complex. However, he states that some studies have shown that as the poverty rate increases, crime also increases.

Furthermore, Miller (2018) stresses that poverty is primarily from three causes, specifically, (1) population growth, (2) physical and mental factors, and (3) changing opportunities for employment. Focusing on population growth, he emphasizes that most population growth since the 1960s has been in urban areas, because of the abundance of manufacturing jobs. However, over the period, there has been a decrease in manufacturing jobs, and this has caused an increase in unemployment, poverty, and crime. Considering physical or mental factors, Miller (2018:3) questions society’s concerted efforts to include persons with such challenges in the economic fabric of the country; hence, he asks the questions, “What are their opportunities for education? What are their opportunities for employment in jobs paying a livable, or even a minimum wage? and What are their opportunities for receiving health or other care-giving services?” Additionally, looking at changing opportunities for employment, Miller (2018:4) argues that, “service level jobs have increased, but the pay for these is significantly less and many are not at minimum-wage levels. What is more, many are not full-time, and many do not offer benefits.”

Frohlich et al. (2018:5-6) also provide two reasons for poverty, particularly, (1) individual factors, such as certain behaviors and life choices, and (2) structural factors beyond the control of individuals, such as the economy. They argue that individual factors can usually be overcome, and people may get out of poverty by attempting to work full-time at minimum wage or working multiple jobs, or possibly by upward mobility. To the latter point, Frohlich et al. state categorically that, “upward mobility is easier to achieve when segregation and inequality are low, when the system is of higher quality, and young people are supported to obtain an education." For structural factors, they emphasize that the following explanations are germane:

> (1) groups with greater disadvantage will necessarily have lower average educational achievement than more affluent groups;
> (2) a lack of health insurance, low birth weights, fewer preventive doctor visits, school absences, frequent moves and school switches, greater exposure to crime and drug use, job layoffs, financial distress, and a host of other factors are more common in low-income communities and contribute to worse outcomes for children in school as well as for adults who may be trying to improve their standards of living. (P. 6)

From the preceding, in sum, poverty can be attributed to lower levels of education, lower levels of health, less access to affordable food, unemployment/lack of jobs, lack of livable wages, and other socioeconomic factors, such as place of residence and reduced opportunities to progress.

WHO LIVES IN POVERTY AND CONSEQUENCES OF POVERTY

Following the aforementioned causes, Frohlich et al. (2018:7, 20) also assess who lives in poverty, based on the 2017 US Census Bureau current population survey data. They find that, (1) women are more likely to live in poverty than men; (2) poverty rates are higher in the West and South than in the Midwest and Northeast; (3) those living in rural and suburban areas are less likely to be in poverty than those living in urban areas; (4) veterans, single mothers (those without high school education), and the disabled are at a higher risk of living in poverty than other groups; (5) children are at a higher risk of poverty than adults; (6) Blacks and Hispanics are two times as likely to be in poverty than Whites. Native Americans and Alaskan natives are at an even higher risk (more than 25 percent live in poverty); also, of four main races/ethnicities, Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be in poverty than Asians or Whites; and (7) for individuals who belong to more than one of these groups, the risks are higher; for example, young Blacks are one of the most at-risk groups, with a poverty rate of 30 percent; single Black mothers have poverty rate in excess of 40 percent. Overall, then, those who live in poverty can be assessed using the criteria of gender, geography, residency, social grouping, age, race/ethnicity, and multiplicity of grouping.

Furthermore, Frohlich et al. (2018:7-8; 18, 20) address consequences of poverty (i.e., what it means to live in poverty). They stress that, “individuals and families in poverty regularly face serious immediate and long-term concerns, such as paying this month’s rent or heating bill, supporting a child’s education, affording health care, and nutritious food.” They contend that “the most extreme and recognizable form of poverty is homelessness.” They also argue that, there are tens of millions of people, many of whom have a job and a place to live, who experience serious problems associated with low incomes. For instance, they face a lack of immediate access to food, healthcare, and relatively shorter life expectancies.

The authors explain that (2018: 8-9; 20), “receiving a quality education is one of the surest way to exit and stay out of poverty.” In some cases, “even when a child of poorer families have overcome these obstacles to obtaining a quality education, attending college remains elusive due to high costs.” Yet, “college-educated persons working full-time are far less susceptible to the chances of poverty than other groups.” In fact, they argue that, “the geographical grouping of poor Americans in low-income neighborhoods means that many poor Americans face amplified effects of poverty by living in highly poor places.” Thus, they state, based on the Equality of Opportunity Project analysis, that, “for every year a child grows up in a high poverty county, his or her expected annual income drops by as much as several hundreds of dollars.” In brief, the consequences of poverty are serious, immediate, and long-term and could lead to homelessness. Even in the absence of homelessness, lack of access to food, healthcare, and shorter life expectancies prevail, and place of residence is associated with social ills and vices.

Also, other scholars have weighed in on the discussion. For instance, Sandoval, Rank, and Hirschl (2009) indicate that poverty is linked to life course (age) and time period. However, Bernstein et al. (2018) state that poverty is linked to poverty thresholds and age, and these in turn are linked to income-related mortality disparities. Woolf, Johnson, and Geiger (2006) and Holzer et al. (2007) focus on child poverty. Woolf et al. observe that severe poverty affects children and particular races in higher proportions, which has implications for public health, including increase in chronic diseases, severe complications of those diseases, and increased health costs to society. Holzer et al. estimate the costs of child poverty to the United States to be approximately $500 bn per year, a very high cost indeed! Yet, Currier and Sattlemeyer (2014) discuss three major factors that enhance economic mobility in the U.S. These are (1) that continued access to education, especially higher education, remains a very influential driver of upward mobility, (2) that neighborhood poverty during childhood greatly impacts access to opportunity, and (3) that economic mobility and economic security are closely linked. That is, children who grow up at the bottom of the economic ladder, but who as adults extricate themselves from this situation are more financially secure than their peers who remain at the bottom.

SOLUTIONS

What are the solutions to combating poverty? Frohlich et al. (2018) advocate three solutions. First, they mention that government assistance programs (social assistance programs), such as social security (SS), earned income tax credit (EITC), supplementary nutrition assistance program (SNAP), supplemental security income (SSI), Medicaid, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), are great mechanisms for reducing poverty. For example, they find that in 2015, SNAP reduced poverty for about eight million persons and reduced child poverty by 28 percent. They also find that SS in particular has been very effective, based on the 2017 Current population Survey. It stands to reason that these programs should continue. Second, they mention the importance of private aid programs from charities. These programs supplement government efforts. Consequently, their efforts are needed to offset any deficiencies in government programs. Third, they mention general economic conditions that could enhance job acquisition or dampen it. They are of the opinion that, wages are the main, if not the only source of income for most people, and having a job is the most common way to get out of poverty. However, the chances of getting a well-paying job and getting out of poverty depends on local economic conditions. They also argue that, usually, positive minimum-wage policies are relatively effective in helping help low-income workers avoid poverty.

Vallas and Boteach (2014:1-4) suggest ten solutions to reduce poverty, directed at Congress. These are (1) create new jobs, (2) raise the minimum wage, (3) EITC for childless workers, (4) support pay equity, (5) provide paid leave and paid sick leave days, (6) establish work schedules that work, (7) invest in affordable, high quality childcare and early education, (8) expand Medicaid, (9) reform the criminal justice system and enact policies that support successful re-entry, and (10) do no harm; i.e., do not reduce funding for programs and services that support low-income families.

Relatedly, Raising of America (2014:1-2) recommends nine solutions to reduce poverty in America. They are as follows: (1) increase employment, (2) raise the federal minimum wage, (3) sustain not cut the social safety nets, (4) provide paid family and sick leave, (5) end mass incarceration, (6) invest in high quality child care and early education, (7) tackle segregation and concentrated poverty, (8) immigration reform, and (9) end poverty tax (i.e., paying high for almost everything because of living in low-income neighborhoods).

Furthermore, Sawhill (2007) advocates four solutions to minimize poverty. They are (1) a combination of responsible policies from government and responsible behavior from recipients. Responsible behavior includes (a) “getting a good education, (b) one not having children before one marries, and (c) working full-time. When these are done, then government should reward the individuals by making sure that they are not made poor; (2) government should provide early high-quality education to all children from low-income families; (3) government should provide resources to nongovernmental organizations that work to prevent teenage and young adult pregnancies and non-marriage childbearing; and (4) government should encourage and reward work, such as is being done in the welfare program.” Duncan, Smeeding, and Menestrel (2020) indicate that a solution to reduce poverty is to reduce child poverty. According to them, child poverty can best be reduced by developing a program that combines expanding EITC, restructuring the child care tax credit, and introducing a child allowance. Based on the foregoing, in summary, solutions to reducing poverty include government assistance programs (e.g., EITC, TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and Childcare assistance), effective minimum wage policies, job creation policies, criminal justice reform, and responsible policies and responsible behavior.

On their part, Dunning et al. (2003:13-14) examining the issue of persistent poverty, more from a community perspective, state that, “poverty continues to take its toll and will not abate on its own.” In other words, some kind of external impetus is needed to deal with the situation. In fact, persistent poverty in the community directly affects individual and household poverty. To ameliorate this, they suggest “a shift from industrial development to community development.” What is more, they make ten specific recommendations to deal with the issue. Among them are “(1) partner with local leadership; (2) involve local community residents; (3) begin building a workforce capable of competing for quality jobs; (4)

maximize and measure return to investment; (5) leverage private sector investment; (6) empower regional entities to design and implement regional development objectives; (7) reexamine economic growth policy and state reinvestment practices; (8) fine-tune investments to adjust for readiness; (9) focus on investments to capitalize on local assets; and (10) ensure coordination among all government entities and maximize utilization of existing resources."

CONCLUSION

This article has examined what poverty is, dimensions of poverty, state specific poverty information with emphasis on selected SRSA states, state specific county information again with emphasis on selected SRSA states, causes of poverty, who lives in and consequences of poverty, and solutions to poverty. For the selected SRSA states, Virginia has the lowest poverty rate, at 10.7 percent, and Mississippi has the highest poverty rate, at 19.7 percent. To reduce poverty, government interventions and nongovernmental interventions are essential. In attempting to reduce poverty, however, stakeholders have to measure progress via evaluations, and make modifications if aspects of programs are not working. Also, the sustainable development goal 2015 and beyond, number 1, focuses on poverty. This goal puts in place "pillars" to reduce poverty across the world. To reduce poverty in earnest, good education should be part of the solution. Stopping school at 12th grade is not enough; those who do not want to go to college should be encouraged to go to trade school to learn a trade. Another aspect in reducing poverty is affordable healthcare. Costly healthcare can break the household's coffers. In this case, the government should help low-income families with subsidies. There is no need to have a healthcare system that many people cannot afford. A serious look at accessibility is essential. Yet another aspect reducing poverty is providing good and affordable shelter. Not being able to get shelter disrupts "peaceful" living. In other words, there must be a minimum affordable living to have the requisite quality of life. No one, I assume, wants to see a "neighbor" live in misery or struggling to make it.

Although there are efforts at the national, state, and local levels, and even nongovernmental levels, to ameliorate the situation, probably more coordinated efforts could speed up reducing poverty at the individual level. Borrowing from the United Nations Human Development Index, per capita income is a key component of the poverty or development dimension. It determines standard of living, and the lower it is, the more the poverty, and the less the standard of living. Hence, attention should be paid to paying livable wage in order to raise the income level. However, it starts from getting a good/higher education (i.e., beyond the 12th grade). All things equal, this leads to higher income, and higher income reduces poverty, and increases affordability of food, shelter, healthcare, etc. One thing that is discussed, but not usually committed to, is the idea of striving to give everyone equal opportunity in society. If the doctrine of "equal opportunity" is pursued with passionate vigor, then it will truly help place a significant dent in poverty levels. The preceding notwithstanding, one should not overlook individual responsibility and choices in the overall scheme of things. Government, other entities, or even individuals may try to help, but one's responsibility is a sine qua non (essential condition) to the process. At the community level, investment in appropriate infrastructure, in human capital, and requisite job creation may be the answer. The community level solution should be community specific so as to deal with unique situations. There is hope if the appropriate steps are taken to substantially reduce poverty at the national, state, and county levels. On this wise, the Dunning et al. (2003) recommendations, already alluded to, are germane.

ENDNOTES

[1] I presented an earlier version of this paper as my Presidential Address at the 52nd meeting of the Southern Rural Sociological Association held virtually in February 2021.
[2] Poverty rates are measured as percent persons.

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