

*'The Poor in America'*

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## ABSTRACT

### *'The Poor in America'*

Who would ever think that there is a growing 'poor' in America? Although America's classification of the word 'poor' is a far cry from the vernacular meaning, the poor in essence still exists. Poverty in America also seems to be an oxymoron, to equate America and Poverty in the same sentence seems to go together as 'nails scratching down a chalkboard'. There has been a concerted effort throughout the history of man to combat and eliminate the poor and poverty, all to no avail. Notwithstanding, there is way to both curb to growth of the poor and eliminate the spread of poverty by offering everyone an opportunity to live the abundant life through the Lord Jesus Christ.

## ***Introduction***

The plight of the poor in America has always been a hot topic of discussion. This topic is hard to digest for the everyday American, who is shaded from the reality of poverty and the plight of the poor due to a world engulfed in schedules, suspenses, creature comforts and a daily life exposure that is painted with the rosy picture of television. The poor in American, although not exclusive, is a population that includes the homeless, the mentally ill, domestic violence, addictions and those caught in the cycle of governmental program dependence. This research paper will attempt to take a cursory look at some causes and remedies for the plight of the poor while highlighting a huge difference between the poor of America and the poor of the world.

***America's Poor***

Webster defines poor as having little or no means to support one's self or needy or impoverished 1. Modern sociologists relatively define poverty in America as money income of about two-thirds and family poverty about one-third the national average 2. Furthermore, according to Patricia Ruggles (one of the leading experts on the measurement of poverty), the poverty threshold would be \$23,000 for a family of four, which equates to 27% of the US population below the poverty threshold 3. Further statistics, as shown below, also show a huge disparity between minorities and Caucasians when it comes to classifying poverty between the race classes in America:

Year	Below poverty level			Below poverty level		
	Total	Number	Percent	Total	Number	Percent
<b>ALL RACES</b>						
2003.....	287,699	35,861	12.5	238,903	25,684	10.8
<b>WHITE ALONE</b>						
2003.....	231,866	24,272	10.5	192,074	16,740	8.7
<b>BLACK ALONE</b>						
2003.....	35,989	8,781	24.4	29,727	6,870	23.1
<b>ASIAN ALONE</b>						
2003.....	11,856	1,401	11.8	10,333	1,017	9.8
<b>HISPANIC (of any race)</b>						
2003.....	40,300	9,051	22.5	35,469	7,637	21.5

1 – Webster's *New World Dictionary, College Edition* (New York, World Publishing Company, 1960)

2 – *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1982-83* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Governmental Printing Office, 1983) Tables 718, 727 and Page 417.

3 – Mandrell B. R., Schram, B., *An Introduction to Human Services* (Boston, Pearson Education, 2006) p. 361

When an individual defines the words poverty or poor in their own minds...one connects these terms with words such as 'destitute' & 'ghetto'...and such vernacular insensitive glibs as 'bum' & 'hobo'...and one pictures in their mind the shanty towns, bowerys and squalors that inculcate societies throughout the world. However, there is a drastic distinction between the poor of the world and the poor of America. Although there are those in America who are hungry and in need, most of those in need have much in comparison to their global citizen counterpart. Consider the 'amenities' that encompass the poor in America:

The following are facts about persons defined as "poor" by the Census Bureau, taken from various government reports:

- *Forty-six percent of all poor households actually own their own homes. The average home owned by persons classified as poor by the Census Bureau is a three-bedroom house with one-and-a-half baths, a garage, and a porch or patio.*
- *Seventy-six percent of poor households have air conditioning. By contrast, 30 years ago, only 36 percent of the entire U.S. population enjoyed air conditioning.*
- *Only 6 percent of poor households are overcrowded. More than two-thirds have more than two rooms per person.*
- *The average poor American has more living space than the average individual living in Paris, London, Vienna, Athens, and other cities throughout Europe. (These comparisons are to the average citizens in foreign countries, not to those classified as poor.)*
- *Nearly three-quarters of poor households own a car; 30 percent own two or more cars.*
- *Ninety-seven percent of poor households have a color television; over half own two or more color televisions.*
- *Seventy-eight percent have a VCR or DVD player; 62 percent have cable or satellite TV reception.*
- *Seventy-three percent own microwave ovens, more than half have a stereo, and a third have an automatic dishwasher.*

Overall, the typical American defined as poor by the government has a car, air conditioning, a refrigerator, a stove, a clothes washer and dryer, and a microwave. He has two color televisions, cable or satellite TV reception, a VCR or DVD player, and a stereo. He is able to obtain medical care. His home is in good repair and is not overcrowded. By his own report, his family is not hungry and he had sufficient funds in the past year to meet his family's essential needs. While this individual's life is not opulent, it is equally far from the popular images of dire poverty conveyed by the press, liberal activists, and politicians 4. Additionally, There are frequent charges of widespread hunger and malnutrition in the United States 5. To understand these assertions, it is important, first of all, to distinguish between hunger and the more severe problem of malnutrition.

Malnutrition (also called undernutrition) is a condition of reduced health due to a chronic shortage of calories and nutriment. There is little or no evidence of poverty-induced malnutrition in the United States. Hunger is a far less severe condition: a temporary but real discomfort caused by an empty stomach. The government defines hunger as "the uneasy or painful sensation caused by lack of food" 6. While hunger due to a lack of financial resources does occur in the United States, it is limited in scope and duration.

According to the USDA, on a typical day, fewer than one American in 200 will experience hunger due to a lack of money to buy food 7. The hunger rate rises somewhat

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4 –Rector, R., Johnson, K., PH.D. *Understanding Poverty in America* Jan 5, 2004, Statistical Welfare Research Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation

5. See, for example, *A Survey of Childhood Hunger in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Food Research Action Center, Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project, 1995) and "1997 National Research Study," in *Hunger 1997: The Faces and Facts* (Chicago, Ill.: America's Second Harvest, 1997).

6. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Household Food Security in the United States in 1995: Summary Report for the Food Security Measurement Project*, 1997, p. 5.

7. In all cases, the figures concerning hunger in this paper refer solely to hunger caused by a lack of funds to buy food and do not include hunger that is attributed to any other cause.

when examined over a longer time period; according to the USDA, some 6.9 million Americans, or 2.4 percent of the population, were hungry at least once during 2002 <sup>8</sup>. Nearly all hunger in the United States is short-term and episodic rather than continuous <sup>9</sup>. Although there is a difference in how relative the poor are defined in America with the global poor, ‘poverty is very bad for your health, both physical and mental. Poor children are at higher risk for any number of health problems, including attention deficit disorder, asthma, dental disease and injuries resulting from accidents or physical abuse and neglect. Further, they score lower on developmental tests and they have a higher mortality rate’ (Aber, Bennett, Conley, & Li, 1997) <sup>10</sup>. Ultimately, we must remember that all (locally and globally) are suffering and as we will observe later, reach out with solutions to remedy the plight of the poor in America.

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8. Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States*, 2002, U.S. Department of Agriculture, October 2003, p. 7. The numbers in the text were taken from Table 1 of the USDA publication. Many individuals reside in households where at least one family member but not all family members experienced hunger. This is particularly true among families with children where the adults are far more likely than the children to experience hunger. According to Table 1 of *Household Food Security in the United States, 2002*, 9.3 million persons lived in a household where at least one household member experienced hunger; however, not all of these persons experienced hunger themselves. The number of persons who experienced hunger individually was lower: 6.8 million people, including 6.3 million adults and 567,000 children.

9. The numbers of persons identified as hungry throughout this paper correspond to individuals that the USDA identifies as "food insecure with hunger." The USDA also has a second, broader category: "food insecure without hunger." As the term implies, these individuals are not hungry. They may, however, at certain times in the year be forced to eat cheaper foods or a narrower range of foods than those to which they are ordinarily accustomed. According to the USDA, 7.6 percent of all households were "food insecure without hunger" in 2002. Food advocacy groups often inaccurately include the households that are "food insecure without hunger" in the count of households that are deemed hungry.

10 - Aber, J.L., , Bennett N. G., Conley D. C., & Li, J. (1997). *The Effects of Poverty on Child Health and Development*. Annual Review of Public Health 18, pp. 463-483



### ***Causes: Nature of Man, Big Government***

The causes of the poor are manifold and continuous. Jesus taught, *'For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always'* (Matt 26:11). With this continual occupation of the poor, scripture further teaches on the depravity of man, *'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?'* (Jer 17:9). This condition of anthropological depravity contributes to the cause of the poverty. Further, the condition of the heart contributes to an array of vice including laziness, *'He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent maketh rich'* (Prov10:4) and *'Slothfulness casteth into a deep sleep; and an idle soul shall suffer hunger'* (Prov19:15) and greed, *'And their houses shall be turned unto others, with their fields and wives together: for I will stretch out my hand upon the inhabitants of the land, saith the LORD. For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them every one is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely'* (Jeremiah 6:12-13)...all which connect a thread of poor choices leading to poor results. Moreover, R.C. Sproul distinguishes four causes of poverty: sloth, calamity, exploitation and personal sacrifice <sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, 'types of poverty can be also divided into two chief categories: self-caused and imposed' <sup>12</sup>. Man by nature will not work nor save money. Man by nature will oppress his neighbor and take advantage of those who seem weaker than himself.

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11 – Sproul, R.C., (1983). *Ethics and the Christian*, Tyndale House Publishing, pp.54-56

12 – Beisner, C., (2001). *Prosperity and Poverty*, The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, P. 194

Fomenting these causes, this country has deviated from its constitutional roots to an expansive, intrusive and a socialistic government. Under socialism, ‘the individual is given little incentive to invent, produce a better product or to be more efficient so a product can be sold at a lower price and thus benefit all of society. The state determines everything. Those who submit to Socialism are rewarded’<sup>13</sup>. ‘Those who do not submit will be mercifully put out of the way’<sup>14</sup>. With this increase in government comes layers of tax thirsty bureaucracy and government programs. Most government social programs do not remove poverty, but rather promotes it, by encouraging dependence on the government dole and discouraging self-responsibility and potential. ‘American society has strayed far away from its beginnings...instead of desiring freedom from governmental interference and instead of looking to the government primarily as a source of protection from foreign or domestic enemies and not as the provider of services and benefits, American have embraced the very centralized government the Founding Fathers urged them to fear and hold in check’<sup>15</sup>. Through out the years, government has grown to the point of being a ‘national nanny’. Many look to the government as an eternal resource. This fact, compounded with a lack of work ethic from a younger generation, has equated to a mindset of entitlement that believes the government can supply all our needs. What many do not realized is that the government does not produce anything...it can only take from others and redistribute to the elected of their choice. With this scenario, many have blamed our system as the cause of inequality...as stated,

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13 – DeMar, G., *Ruler of the Nations*, American Vision, Powder Springs Georgia 2001 p. 24

14 – Tom Rose, *Economics: The American Economy from a Christian Perspective* (Mercer, Pennsylvania: American Enterprise Publications, 1985 p. 121)

15 – *The Rebirth of America*, (1986). Arthur S. Demoss Foundation, Philadelphia, p. 130

‘the free enterprise system with the incentive for profit has facilitated this unequal distribution of income’ 16. However, the government that can promise you everything you want, must by definition, take everything you’ve got to pay for it.

Government was not designed to provide but to protect. The role of government is basically articulated in six ways...1) to define and defend private property, national defense, exercise civil justice, quarantine to protect human life, maintain just weight and measures and defend Christianity from Public attack and to protect its 17.

### ***Futile Remedies***

There have been many attempts to curb the poor and eliminate poverty, the New Deal (FDR), the Great Society (LBJ) and the newest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century...the Grand Bargain (Barney Frank) 18. These programs are based on big government as the solution, and yet, they have yielded negative results. Further, universal programs were created as an end to poverty, to no avail. As stated, ‘we need to create a real safety net, including restoring entitlement to financial assistance; establishing a minimum level cash assistance that is high enough to meet basic needs; restoring food stamps cuts and providing all benefits to immigrant, including undocumented immigrants. We also need to work on improvements for all workers-an increase in the minimum wage, paid family leave, guaranteed child care, comparable worth policies, decent unemployment compensation, universal health care, a full employment policy, investment in education and vocational training and aggressive enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. This end

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16 – Ogburn, W., Nimkoff, M., *Sociology*, Cambridge, Mass: The Riverside Press 1940

17 – DeMar, G., *Ruler of the Nations*, , American Vision, Powder Springs Georgia 2001. pp. 76-81

18 – Kranish, M., Kerber, R., *Rep Frank Offers Business a Grand Bargain*, , Boston Globe (Nov 19, 2006)

to welfare will take us down many paths, all leading to gender justice’ 19. Furthermore, social programs such as Food Stamps, Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), women Infants and Children (WIC), that were designed to become stop gap solutions that allow an individual to regain a sense of self sufficiency, have become programs to ‘live off of’. The hidden consequences however, is that these programs must ravish the middle class (tax base and working base) while promoting a sense of entitlement. California is a prime example of an economy that is insolvent due to the middle class paying the medical costs and paying the taxes to support programs for the poor and illegal immigrants. Philanthropy and charity by itself will not eliminate poverty. An individual who just receives, by nature, will not change, but instead will become more expectant and the sense of entitlement will increase.

### ***Biblical Remedy: A Change of Heart and Church Discipleship***

The church, through God’s word and the power of the Holy is the only answer to the malady of poverty. The church has the compassion to look beyond the problem (which only results in physical solutions) but rather offers Spiritual solutions (which results in true change of being). Scripture teaches, *‘For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land’ (Deut 15:11)* and *‘Only they would that we should remember the poor; the same which I also was forward to do’ (Gal 2:10)*.

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19 – Mink, G., (1998). *Welfare’s End*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 139

First, the church can introduce of person to Jesus Christ. Thus, providing internal change for that person. As it is written, *‘Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new’ (II Cor 5:17)*. Henceforth, it is not ‘same’ person getting the ‘same’ social services and still remaining in the cycle of dependence and want...but a new person with new motives who desires to reach self-sufficiency in Christ. A change in character is evident and expected when an individual comes to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Moreover, the church can address the widespread homeless problem that is connected with poverty. Homelessness has various causes such as... ‘mental illness, lack of needed services, low-paying jobs, substance abuse, unemployment, domestic violence, poverty and prison release’ <sup>20</sup>. The church can create ‘transformational housing’ programs that incorporate Christian values and not just shelter. Through a Christian transformation housing program, individuals can have a nurturing environment, but most of, the comprehensive Christian structure that promotes a change from the inside out. In fact, with a proper computation of homeless statistics, the church is well able to manage support within themselves, as stated, ‘this is something probably all but the smallest churches could do, and many larger churches could care for many more. Churches alone, with no help from civil government at any level, could provide for all of these poor with little difficulty’ <sup>21</sup>.

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20 – Mandrell B. R., Schram, B., (2006) *An Introduction to Human Services*, Boston: Pearson, p. 249.

21 – Beisner, C., (2001). *Prosperity and Poverty*, The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock. P. 200

Also, the church can promote jobs... *'Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth'* (Eph 4:28). As a result, the church promotes a work ethic that eliminates the need for an entitlement mentality & spawns a sense of individual responsibility, *'For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat'* (II Thess 3:10). Further, the churches can help with 'evangelism, discipleship, charitable giving and political action'<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, this kind of lovingkindness and structure that the local church operates from, will not only help the local individual, but will also promote change and restoration within the local family. Subsequently, as change takes place within the family, change will take place within the local community, thus impacting society as a whole...for the family is the basic building block of society.

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22 – Beisner, C., (2001). Prosperity and Poverty, The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock. P. 205

## ***Conclusion***

The plight of the poor will always be talking point, whether in the scholastic circles of academia or the ecclesiastical confines of Christendom or in the governmental halls of Congress. Copious research studies have taken place such as the ‘community study, the demographic study, the functionalist study and the inter-actionist approach study’<sup>23</sup>. In these discussions were plans, strategies and methodologies that have been tried, repackaged, relabeled and eventually failed. The plight of the poor and the state of poverty in society can only be successfully addressed with the intervention of the institution of the Church, the Body of Christ...where the heart of the issue must be addressed...the heart of the issue being the heart of the individual.

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23 – Kornblum, W., (1997). *Sociology in a Changing World*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace. P.39

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