

Poverty Has Many Faces

In 1968, thousands of people took to the streets of Washington D.C. to demand freedom from systemic poverty in a campaign led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The aptly named “Poor People’s Campaign,” aimed to achieve economic justice for all, regardless of race.¹

In 2025, poverty in the United States still affects millions of Americans across all racial backgrounds, despite consistent economic growth.² According to the U.S. Census Bureau as of 2023, 36.8 million people or approximately 11.1% of Americans live in poverty.³ Since 2009, the federal minimum wage has remained at \$7.25 per hour, while costs of living have skyrocketed.⁴ This growing disparity makes it increasingly difficult for the average American to establish financial stability. In a 2024 report conducted by the Federal Reserve, only 33% of adults reported themselves as “living comfortably,” demonstrating widespread fiscal distress among a large part of all Americans.⁵ Nonetheless, historical and systemic oppression has led to disproportionate poverty rates within specific racial groups. Similarly, educational disparities, discrimination in the labor market, neighborhood crime rates, and other factors, have led to pronounced differences in economic security across racial groups.⁶

Addressing the problem of poverty requires an inward look into policy solutions for issues such as wage stagnation. The 2025 poverty guideline for a single person household is \$15,650.⁷ A full-time employee working a traditional forty-hour workweek at federal minimum wage would earn \$15,080. Even with consistent employment, the worker would fall \$570 below the poverty line. When combined with the persistently rising costs of necessities such as housing, healthcare, food, and education, it places Americans in a challenging situation. This wage

¹ Mantler, Gordon K. *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974*. University of North Carolina Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.5149/9781469608068_mantler.

² “Economic Output,” State of the Nation Project, n.d., <https://stateofnation.org/measure/economic-output/>.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, “National Poverty in America Awareness Month: January 2025,” January 4, 2025, www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/poverty-awareness-month.html#:~:text=Official%20Poverty%20Measure,and%20Table%20A%2D1).

⁴ “History of Changes to the Minimum Wage Law,” U.S. Department of Labor, n.d., <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history>.

⁵ Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, “Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2023,” May 1, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.17016/8960>.

⁶ Janis Bowdler and Benjamin Harris, “Racial Inequality in the United States,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, July 22, 2022, [https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/racial-inequality-in-the-united-states#:~:text=These%20disparities%20are%20evident%20in,significantly%20\(see%20Figure%203\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/racial-inequality-in-the-united-states#:~:text=These%20disparities%20are%20evident%20in,significantly%20(see%20Figure%203)).

⁷ “Poverty Guidelines,” ASPE, n.d., <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines>.

stagnation has led to an exacerbation of the wage gap amongst lower/middle classes in comparison to the upper class. This disparity makes it increasingly difficult for a working American to survive and nearly impossible to achieve upward social mobility and thus improvement of socioeconomic status.

The reality of poverty in the United States has remained a significant issue for Americans of all demographics. Addressing poverty includes addressing all economic factors, such as wage structures, inflation, and financial accessibility. As Dr. King posited in his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize lecture, “There is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will... Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation.”⁸

⁸ “Martin Luther King Jr. - Nobel Lecture,” NobelPrize.org, n.d., www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/.