

It Can Happen to Anyone

The experience of poverty is highly dependent upon the society a person lives in and their status in that society. Different societies, of course, have different standards of living. What might constitute poverty in one country might not equal poverty in another. The phenomenon of poverty in the United States and the intellectual and scientific responses to it have changed over time, from the colonial period to the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century to the global economy of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The economic system in America is complex and multifaceted. For example, during the eighteenth century, the city of Boston provided for the poor by creating workhouses, which gave people a place to work and stay, regardless of age or sex. It was believed that unless someone was physically or mentally disabled, they should work for their keep. Boston's experience was repeated in many other towns throughout the United States, especially in the north. Ironically, during the Industrial Revolution (which generated greater production and expanding capital) brought more poverty to a greater number of people. Since there was a lack of transportation to growing cities and a shift from agricultural to factory work, it left many without jobs. More recently, in the 1960s, poverty was still a very prevalent issue. Despite the War on Poverty in the 1960s, the gap between the rich and the poor continued to grow because of a lack of funds or support for programs that were designed to promote prosperity.

The poor have always been viewed with suspicion by many people who, having rarely experienced poverty themselves, assume that poverty is partly a matter of choice. Why does the richest country in the world still have poverty? The minimum wage in most states is not enough to support an adequate living. Racial and sexual discrimination make upward mobility very challenging. The economy fails to distribute resources to the most economically vulnerable. Policy decisions designed to promote financial growth leave some individuals behind. Fifty-nine percent of Americans will spend at least one year below the official poverty line between the ages of 20 and 75. That number rises to 76 percent if we focus on people whose annual income is less than \$13,000. The COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent example that poverty is not rare and that someone that you know has been affected by it.

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Information sourced from: Andrew Dobelstein's "The Two Legends of American Poverty: Breaking Out of Poverty's Historic Snare" in *Poverty & Public Policy*, vol. 9, no. 4, Dec. 5, 2017; Russell Lawson and Benjamin Lawson's "Introduction" in *Poverty in America: An Encyclopedia* (ABC-CLIO, 2008); The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica's "Poverty" in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2020); Mark R. Rank's "Five Myths about Poverty" in *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2021.