

# PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## **A Commitment to Address Poverty and Inequality**

Poverty is the single greatest threat to individual human development and it simultaneously creates profound social disruption in the United States and around the world. Unless institutions and citizens take steps now to reduce and prevent poverty—and the growing inequality that deepens and widens its damaging repercussions—we will face a nightmarish future that can be measured in untold numbers of destroyed lives, communities, and institutions.

Poverty and inequality are responsible for adults often being too stressed to parent well; inadequate access to nourishing food, clean water, and sanitation; dilapidated housing, homelessness, and dangerous communities; schools unable to educate children to read, write, and think for themselves; conflict, crime, and violence; few work opportunities and low pay for jobs that do exist; daily struggles to manage personal, family, and financial chaos; and risks for premature birth and early death. All of these consequences contribute to the developmental damage that results from limited access to the basic resources that nurture us. Ultimately, poverty and inequality engender hopelessness, helplessness, and misery, and they tear at the social fabric of families and communities.

For children who grow up in poverty, risks for adverse outcomes far outweigh those experienced by children in more affluent families. Children of low income families are at higher risk for premature death; injuries from accidents; abuse and neglect; the witnessing of violence; lower scores on developmental tests; more behavioral problems; lower academic functioning; incapacitating illnesses; and psychological disorders. Research indicates that poverty actually harms children's developing brains, creating potentially lifelong impairments.

Powerful systemic factors frequently hamper movement out of poverty, so the adverse effects of an impoverished childhood often carry into adulthood. Adults who were poor as children are more likely to experience or engage in the following: continuing poverty; difficulty finding and keeping adequately paying work; relationship problems; violence and criminal acts; single motherhood; use of illicit substances; and health problems. Many who plunge into poverty as adults also experience increased stressors that can be a significant blow to psychological and socioeconomic functioning. These numbers are likely to increase given the life-harming vicissitudes of economic recession, climate change, large-scale conflicts, and other severe risks to human stability and safety.

Poverty now afflicts nearly half of the world's population, including one billion children. In the United States, over 43 million people live in poverty, while tens of millions more live with low incomes that create similar problems. Children, women, and minorities of color face a disproportionate burden. According to a 2010 report from the Census Bureau, in the U.S. children constitute 24% of the population but comprise about 34% of the nation's poor; and 26% of African-Americans, 25% of Hispanics, and 12% of Asian Americans live in poverty, compared to 9% of Whites. This racial gap has remained remarkably stable since the 1970s and shows no sign of narrowing.

The conditions of poverty and growing inequality between the rich and poor are associated with a broad range of local and global problems with rippling effects, including wars, terrorism, environmental degradation that contributes to droughts and famines, the abuse of women, crime, school failure, delinquency, health problems, and homelessness. These problems affect most of us either directly or indirectly, such as through the taxes we pay to support our military, legal, educational, and healthcare systems. Poverty, then, harms the poor most—but it is everyone's problem and demands that all of us attend to its solutions.

False beliefs about poverty that blame the poor are tragic hallmarks of a society doing little or nothing to help the impoverished. Such misperceptions about poverty's causes and effects allow too many institutions and individuals to ignore its consequences. In fact, research shows that how we structure our economies and business practices—including low wages, lack of workers' benefits, and insufficient community resources—are significant contributors to poverty. Moreover, government programs to help the poor don't enable most of them to escape the structural dynamics that limit their access to much-needed resources.

Beyond the individual human toll, poverty's costs to society are staggering. A 2007 study estimated the U.S. spends \$500 billion a year, or 4% of GDP, to counter poverty's direct and indirect effects on the nation's citizens. Meanwhile, some countries also pay the price for poverty and inequality through conflicts and wars over scarce

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resources that exacerbate poverty; through environmental degradation as the poor manufacture goods for the wealthy or seek to eke out a living but in so doing destroy the land and water that support them; and through inordinate human suffering, including thirst, starvation, and the perils of refugee status.

Clearly, the costs of poverty and inequality to society are enormous. Yet studies invariably suggest that ending poverty costs far less than we think. One 2006 study estimated the cost to alleviate poverty in the U.S. at about \$400 billion, and such an investment would return that amount nearly four-fold through reduced costs in social services and other domains. The U.N. Millennium Project, backed by leading scientists and practitioners from many fields, estimated that by 2015 the cost to reduce poverty by half in developing nations would be under \$200 billion, requiring a contribution of only 50 cents from every \$100 of income in rich-world countries. Other estimates suggest that less than 1% of the GNP would eliminate child poverty in the U.S. and that in European countries transferring 1% to 4% of wealthier individuals' incomes to the poor would eliminate their citizens' poverty.

Apart from any financial analysis, it is important to recognize that addressing poverty is in everyone's interest. Research shows that inequality in society is harmful to all citizens. More unequal societies have higher rates of most social problems, including violent crime, poor health, mental illness, low educational attainment, teen births, and lack of social mobility. This pattern holds for the U.S. as well—states with greater inequality tend to have higher levels of these same social ills. Such findings highlight an under-appreciated reality: reducing poverty and inequality not only benefits the poor. It also leads to a better life for those who are relatively well off today.

Beyond all of the considerations described above, there is the simple, powerful moral imperative that we, as a society, should do all we can to help those that poverty and inequality harm. Research and practice point to a variety of means to thwart poverty and inequality and their damaging effects on so many people around the world:

- Implement policies that promote high-quality education for all and full employment at decent and fair wages, both of which will provide equal access to and the just distribution of resources needed to live healthy lives.
- Facilitate economic growth in ways that, instead of accruing the most benefits to corporations and wealthy citizens, focus on assistance to bring the most needy into the socioeconomic fold.
- Work with governments, NGOs, and communities to meet the basic physical and psychosocial needs of citizens living in poverty more effectively, more consistently, and more quickly.
- Provide early childhood intervention with a strong parent-support component.
- Re-envision justice services for the poor, who are more likely to be caught in the snare of police actions because of poverty's association with criminal behavior, profiling, and stereotyped assumptions.
- Focus on the needs of women and people of color, who often bear the largest brunt of poverty's harm as they struggle to care for their children, homes, and communities.
- Address other essentials that people living in poverty need, including improved access to decent housing and transportation, quality child-care services, and safer communities.
- Pursue accountability and justice in response to abuses linked to exploitation of the poor and disadvantaged.

These and other strategies have been shown to be effective in dismantling the conditions that enable poverty and inequality to persist in a world that can better distribute its resources. Meaningful progress also requires that we fully value and respect the dreams and lived experiences of those too often relegated to positions of powerlessness. It is therefore crucial that the poor themselves have a significant voice in policy deliberations, and that they be a vital part of any coalition working for change.

Ultimately, as part of this coalition, mental health professionals, social scientists, activists, and leaders of our myriad institutions must make the elimination of poverty an urgent priority. Anything less will enable poverty's devastation to directly endanger and diminish the lives of too many millions of our fellow human beings and to indirectly harm all of us, and the world we live in, for generations to come.

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*Psychologists for Social Responsibility seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to the many issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information, please contact us at [info@psysr.org](mailto:info@psysr.org).*

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