

## Poverty

The ILO condemns persistent poverty as a “moral indictment of our times.”

For individuals, poverty is a vicious cycle of poor health, reduced working capacity, low productivity, and shortened life expectancy ... it leads to the trap of inadequate schooling, low skills, insecure income, early parenthood, ill health, and an early death.\*

Sources: Spearing, M. (2001). “Eating Disorders: Facts About Eating Disorders and the Search for Solutions.” National Institute of Mental Health

As discussed in **Feature 16.1**, a sobering indictment of poverty in the United States arose in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana. Similarly, in France, youths of North African origin engaged in widespread rioting in response to discrimination, unemployment, and poverty.

### Feature 16.1.

#### Poverty as a Diversity Concern

Poverty is a specific area of emphasis for the ILO, which points out that poverty remains widespread in the developing world and some transition countries.\* However, it is not limited to developing and transition countries—it is deep and widespread in some developed nations as well. The horror of the unnecessary loss of lives as a result of Hurricane Katrina in the southeastern United States awakened the country to long-denied and ignored, yet long-lasting and stable, distinctions based on class, poverty, and race. At the time Katrina hit, 26.9% of the population in the region lived in persistent poverty although the U.S. poverty rate was 12.7%. Many affected by the disaster were working poor, employed in restaurants, hotels, and casinos, or driving cabs, trolleys, and limousines for affluent tourists, partygoers, and conventioners.

Despite mandatory evacuation orders, persistent poverty left tens of thousands of people, largely Blacks, unable to flee the natural disaster and vulnerable to its destruction. Without cars, credit cards, or money to rent hotel rooms out of town, the persistently poor went to the Louisiana Superdome (a large sports facility) and Convention Center for shelter. After the hurricane and in the midst of unprecedented flooding, their poverty left these victims vulnerable to the further, human-made destruction of insensitivity and neglect.

In the United States, the poor and disenfranchised live in public housing projects in communities near toxic waste dumps in Chicago, Memphis, and Cleveland; near cancer-causing refineries in Baton Rouge and Houston; and in flood-prone areas of Tucson, Dallas, and New Orleans, and struggle to make ends meet.\* Every day, in cities all around the United States, poverty, persistent segregation, poor housing, and separate and unequal schools contribute to preventable disease, violence, and suicide.\* Although widely perceived as an urban problem, many people in poverty live in rural areas, also struggling to make ends meet and in poor living conditions.\* Regardless of their location, those affected by poverty are disproportionately minorities, with American Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans consistently about twice as likely as Whites and Asians to live at or below the poverty line.\* Although minorities are disproportionately poor, Whites are the majority of the U.S. poor numerically. Media representations, however, portray significantly more Blacks as poor and support other erroneous perceptions—such as that the poor primarily live in cities and that they are lazy. One study found that only 30% of the poor adults in media representations were depicted as working or in job training, although 50% of the poor work full- or part-time.\*

Erroneous perceptions aside, being poor has similar consequences worldwide—from poor health to inadequate schooling to early death in Africa, Brazil, England, India, Mexico, and the United States—everywhere one would venture to look. Favelas, barrios, projects, shanty towns, slums, and the backwoods are where the impoverished can be found. Although who is impoverished varies by where one is in the world, persistent poverty is a universal diversity concern. The ILO views “discrimination based on race, caste, ethnic origin, skin colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation, health status and disability” as an “underlying feature” of persistent poverty.\*

In France, the motto *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (“liberty, equality, fraternity”) has little meaning to immigrants of color and their French descendants. As in the United States, in France, unemployment, underemployment, and poverty among the foreign-born, who are often racial and ethnic minorities, is considerably higher than among the natives, and this is consistent across education levels.\* Discrimination against immigrants in Europe is correlated with higher poverty.\*

### Questions to Consider

1. Given equal education and opportunity, why is it easier for Whites in the United States to escape poverty and discrimination than it is for people of color?
2. Why is it easier for men to avoid or escape poverty than it is for women?
3. The ILO proposes that discrimination is an underlying feature of poverty. How are discrimination in employment and poverty related for workers around the world? Discuss.
4. In this and previous chapters, the un- and underemployment of non-dominant group members were documented. How do such employment patterns negatively affect the productivity of a country?

In the United States, many tend to blame those who are poor for their situations, often failing to acknowledge the role of discrimination and systemic exclusion and attributing poverty instead to personal failures and laziness—poor people could do better if they simply tried.\* Like the meritocracy myth that allows people to believe they alone are responsible for having achieved their wealth and positions, the predicament of the poor or otherwise disadvantaged is seen as a direct result of their choices. However, some nine million of the poor in the United States are *working poor*, earning too little to escape poverty. Blacks and Hispanics are more than twice as likely as Whites and women are more likely than men to be working poor. Of occupations requiring less education, people working in service fields (disproportionately women and minorities) are more likely to be working poor than those working in male-dominated fields (e.g., farming, forestry, and fishing, or natural resource, construction, and maintenance).\* As discussed in previous chapters, job “choice,” gender-role socialization, employer channeling and steering, and race and sex discrimination affect proportions of different groups represented in higher paid versus lower paid jobs. Wage theft by employers also contributes to poverty among the working poor.

The ILO acknowledges the relationship between discrimination and poverty and proposes that people living in persistent poverty draw from enormous reservoirs of courage, ingenuity, persistence, and mutual support to keep on the treadmill of survival. Simply coping with poverty demonstrates the resilience and creativity of the human spirit.... Imagine where their efforts could take them with the support and possibilities to move up a ladder of opportunity. Our common responsibility is to help put it there.\*

**Misperception:**

Most people who live in persistent poverty are lazy and unmotivated.

**Reality:**

Most people living in poverty survive through enormous courage, persistence, and resilience.

Valuing, pursuing, and embracing diversity can help place a ladder of opportunity at the feet of those previously ignored but who have enormous reservoirs of skills and assets, be they poor, minority group members, women, sexual minorities, people with disabilities, or other non-dominant group members. At the same time, valuing, pursuing, and embracing diversity can be beneficial for the organizations that employ previously devalued workers and for the societies in which they live.