**Poverty and the Myths that Support**

**Our Collective Ignorance and Indifference**

Because of the prevailing ideology in the United States as a land of equal opportunity that enables any hard-working individual to get ahead and succeed, despite personal obstacles, many people believe that poverty simply results from an individual’s poor economic decisions or personal inadequacies. In fact, many factors contribute to poverty and are little understood by those who have not experienced the realities of life at this economic level.

Mark Rank and Thomas Hirschl, two scholars who have extensively researched poverty, social inequality and class differentiation, address many of the myths about poverty and provide accurate information in their website, Confronting Poverty. The following information, largely taken from the data on their site, presents a more accurate assessment of the reality of poverty.

**Myth**

1. Poverty is limited to few individuals in communities.

**Fact**

1. Nearly 60% of people in the U.S. between 20 and 75 years old will fall below the poverty line for at least one year.
2. The great majority of Americans—4 out of 5 between 25 and 60 years old—will experience welfare use, or unemployment or near poverty.
3. *One-half of our children* will reside in a household that uses food stamps at some point during their childhood.

**Myth**

1. People experience poverty over an extended period of time.

**Fact**

1. Rather than an entrenched underclass of people impoverished for years at a time, the length of time in poverty is relatively short for most people.
2. Causes of poverty include:
3. Loss of a job;
4. Divorce or separation or death of a spouse; and
5. Developing serious medical problems.
6. People may move in and out of poverty several times during their lives.

**Myth**

1. Poverty is an urban issue.

**Fact**

1. Only about 10 % of those in poverty live in urban areas.
2. Poverty is dispersed throughout urban, suburban and rural areas.
3. Two-thirds of those in poverty are white.
4. Persons of color, however, are at a higher risk of poverty than are whites.

**Myth**

1. Assistance to the poor is generous.

**Fact**

1. The safety net is weak and filled with holes.
2. Budget cuts and welfare reforms have made it more difficult to get assistance.
3. Among industrialized countries, the U.S. is among those that expend the fewest resources to pull families out of poverty or to protect them from becoming impoverished.
4. The U.S. is one of few developed nations that does not provide universal health care, affordable child care, or affordable low income housing.
5. The rate of poverty in the U.S. is about twice that of European countries.
6. The U.S. has high overall rates of poverty and exceedingly high levels of poverty among:
7. children,
8. working age adults, and
9. single parent families

**Myth**

1. People’s lack of motivation or personal responsibility causes poverty.

**Fact**

1. Attitudes and values of those in poverty mirror those in mainstream America.
2. The vast majority of those in poverty have worked extensively in the past and will do so in the future.

**Myth**

1. In America, everyone has an equal chance of getting ahead and succeeding.

**Fact**

1. The 5-year probability of experiencing poverty (below 100% of the poverty line) if a person is female, nonwhite, single, between 25 and 29 years old and with a high school diploma or less: 73.7%.
2. The comparable risk of experiencing poverty if a person is male, white, married, between 4 and 49 years old, and with post-high school education: 2.2%.

**Factors that increase the likelihood of avoiding poverty include**:

1. Having more, rather than less, education: the greatest increases in jobs in the U.S. have occurred in service-sector and lower wage positions;
2. Being a middle-aged adult: younger adults and those nearing or in retirement experience lower earnings levels;
3. Being white and male: patterns of discrimination in the U.S. labor market have consistently shown lower wage/salary levels for comparable work for women and persons of color; and
4. Being married: married couples are more likely to have two wage-earners to support their families.

**Solutions to poverty include**:

1. Increased labor market opportunities in jobs with good wages. (Hard-work, earning $9 per hour for work essential to the economy—such as cleaning hospital rooms or hauling garbage—does not pay an adequate wage.)
2. Good health care. (Low-income individuals are less able to afford preventive medical care and more likely to delay care for health issues until they have become much more serious and, correspondingly, more expensive. Their risk for poverty increases exponentially when this occurs. Medical bills are the biggest cause of bankruptcies in the U.S.)
3. Good and affordable child care. (In over 60% of U.S. states, a single-parent, minimum-wage earner would need to devote *all* of his or her income to pay child care costs for two children [Economic Policy Institute, 2015]).
4. Access to quality education and completion of high school. (In 2014, only 76.1% of low-income students graduated compared to 89.8 non-low-income students.)

To learn more about poverty and to calculate your own risk of poverty, go to: https://confrontingpoverty.org/

Rank, M.R., & Hirschl, T.A. (2017) *Confronting poverty.* https://confrontingpoverty.org/

**What Can Mentors Do?**

Mentors may feel overwhelmed in working with young people whose families have low-to-poverty level incomes. Often, they find themselves wanting to give resources (gifts, money, food, etc.) to their mentors. While doing so may help to reduce mentors’ anxieties, it is both contrary to TeamMates’ policies and does not help mentees in the long term.

As Machell, Disabato and Kashdan (2015) note, helping students develop a sense of purpose supports their ability to avoid the behaviors and choices (e.g., use of drugs, early pregnancy, dropping out of school) that increase the likelihood of becoming adults in poverty. In a meta-analysis of research (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn & Valentine, 2011) about the effectiveness of mentoring programs, the authors note that a close relationship with a mentor who helps the student to recognize and build upon strengths can help him or her experience improvements emotionally, behaviorally, socially and academically. Those improvements, in both resisting negative influences and making positive choices, can help a mentee to graduate from high school and go on for further education or training—which scholars and lay people alike recognize as an essential key to escaping poverty.

Machell, K. A., Disabato, D.J., & Kashdan, T. B. (2015*). Buffering the negative impact of poverty on youth: The power of purpose in life.* Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht. DOI: 10.1007/s11205-015-0917-6. Retrieved from: http://toddkashdan.com/articles/purpose%20poverty%202015.pdf

DuBois, D. L., Portillo, N., Rhodes, J. E., Silverthorn, N., & Valentine, J. C. (2011). How effective are mentoring programs for youth? A systematic assessment of the evidence. *Sage* (12) 2. 57-91. DOI: 10.1177/1529100611414806