

# Thirteen Lessons from Fifty Years of Anti-Poverty Policy and Research

Stephen Pimpare 22 April 2015

In the War on Poverty era, poverty was typically understood to be a thing that happens to other people. In the 1964 Economic Report of the President, which laid out the budget for the War on Poverty, the Administration suggested that poor people lived in “a world apart. . . isolated from the mainstream of American life and alienated from its values.” People living in poverty were them, not us, and poverty itself was an anomaly, an aberration, a deviation from the norm. As a result, part of the mission of the Great Society was to incorporate them into “mainstream” institutions and culture, through education, job training, housing, medical care and so on. But we now know that poverty in the U.S. is not an anomaly or something experienced by a small minority of people. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, 34.5% of all Americans were poor at least once for two months or more between 2009 and 2012.

That’s **Lesson One**: Since the War on Poverty era, we’ve learned that **poverty is widespread**, a much more common experience than we thought then. It’s not something that happens to them, but something that

happens to lots of us. That's important because perhaps if people cannot be mobilized to fight poverty for altruistic reasons, they might be mobilized for selfish ones. It's also a way to highlight the virtues of one of VISTA's key program features: because VISTAs earn a poverty-level stipend, perhaps it's easier to think of people struggling to get by with limited resources as one of us, not them.

Poverty is also a different kind of problem than we thought it was then: while some 35% of us experienced poverty for two months or more over that four-year period, fewer than 3% of us were poor for that entire four-year period. Long-term, persistent poverty is real, and we must address it, but that's not what most poverty looks like. Our political rhetoric, and our policies too, have often focused on the wrong problem.

That points us to **Lesson Two**: Given how many people are perched on the edge of poverty, and how many people slip in and out of it, perhaps not poverty but **insecurity is the problem of this age**. More and more Americans live precarious economic lives and are utterly unprepared for an emergency that suddenly reduces their income or increases their expenses. In a recent survey conducted by the U.S. Federal Reserve, 57.9% responded "no" when asked if they had savings that would allow them to survive for three months. What can we do about that, we should ask? And how would remedies directed at insecurity differ from traditional remedies directed at poverty?

**Lesson Three** is this: Childhood is profoundly important, even more than we thought in the 1960s, and the stakes are especially critical for very young children: stress has physiological consequences, and poverty is exceedingly stressful, especially for children; combine that with inadequate prenatal care and childhood nutrition, and you get irreversible cognitive, social, emotional and health deficits. Being in poverty as a child is associated with lower achievement later in school, reduced earnings in adulthood, higher rates of unintended pregnancy, higher rates of incarceration and higher rates of things like cardiovascular disease, disability, and mental illness. **Poverty is toxic for the young.** So, if you want to reduce the number of adults who will be poor tomorrow, reduce the number of children who are poor today. And remember — the largest group of people in poverty are children.

**Lesson Four: Geography is destiny.** The Kennedy administration starting paying attention to poverty thanks in part to Robert Kennedy's visits to poor African American communities, to Native American Reservations, and to Appalachia. Poverty was not and is not a problem only of those particular places and people, but there is still an important lesson here: Where you are born has a lot to do with what opportunities you'll have or not have. One of the most striking more recent developments is the rise of poverty in the suburbs, and this has profound implications given that so much of our social service infrastructure was

built for poverty in the cities. That's another way in which poverty may be a different kind of problem than we thought, and re-affirms the importance of place-based policies and community-specific approaches.

**Lesson Five** is that **race still matters**, and is as important now as it was in the 1960s. We have clearly made progress in reducing African American poverty from its radically high mid-century levels, but at 27% today, it's still three times the poverty rate for white Americans. And African Americans still consistently fare worse across a broad range of indicators, whether it's income, wages, wealth, mobility, education, access to health care, life expectancy or infant mortality. I noted earlier that almost 35% of Americans will experience poverty over a four-year period; it's 49% for African Americans, and 53% for Hispanic Americans. We've got to better reckon with the ways in which disadvantages accumulate, and with the fact that our unique historical legacies mean that poverty for different groups might have different roots, and therefore require different remedies.

**Lesson Six.** I've noted the continued importance of paying attention to children in poverty. But children can also exacerbate the poverty of adults, since children are, inevitably, dependent, and their care costs money and time. This is a much more acute problem than it was 50 years ago, since so many more women are in the labor force. Because we still live in a world in which women do the overwhelming majority of unpaid care work, it is their

earnings that suffers most; that's part of why female-headed families have much higher poverty rates than two-parent families, something the Johnson Administration knew even then. But it's only gotten worse, and this need not be the case. We know this because there are many nations with higher out-of-wedlock birth rates than the U.S., as OECD (Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development) data show; yet all of those nations with more single parents nonetheless have much lower rates of child poverty than we do. If you're working at the community or agency level with poor women with children (who may also be caring for sick or aging family members, remember), you have to attend to the problem of **who cares for those who need care.**

**Lesson Seven.** What we've also learned is not just that some people cannot work because they cannot solve the caregiving puzzle, but that others cannot work because, for a variety of reasons—illness, injury, mental illness, physical or developmental disability—they are not well-suited for the modern labor market. The result is much higher rates of poverty for them. We saw above that few poor people are consistently poor over a four-year period, less than 3% of the population; two-thirds of that group have at least one disability. **Disability must be foregrounded** in our thinking much more than it has been.

**Lesson Eight.** Even those who are able to work, and do, may nonetheless be poor. Thirty-two percent of all women

who work and 24% of all men who work are employed in jobs that pay wages that are so low that even if they work full-time all year round, they will still be poor. It's something we've been seeing for decades in soup kitchens and food pantries across the country, the rising numbers of people who cannot earn enough to put food on the table even with full-time jobs. The problem is particularly acute for people of color—42% of Hispanic Americans and 36% of African Americans work in poverty-wage jobs. No matter how many hours or how many weeks they work, they **cannot escape poverty with wages alone**, which means labor markets need to change, or the public- and civic-sector programs that serve them must.

Medicare and Medicaid point us to **Lesson Nine**, showing us that access to **health care reduces poverty**. The Affordable Care Act, and especially its expansion of access to Medicaid in states that have chosen to take part, is already showing additional evidence of that. If people are less sick, they will be less poor (and, of course, if they are less poor, they are less likely to be sick). We could reduce poverty even more by adding dental coverage and mental health coverage—problems that are especially severe among low-income Americans.

**Lesson Ten. Mass incarceration** is a post-war-on-poverty phenomenon, with effects concentrated in low-income communities of color, especially among African American men. Antipoverty programs have to think about

the prison system and the universe of people affected by it if they're serious about improving well-being. Whatever else it is, our criminal justice system is a massive engine for making people sick, angry and poor.

**Lesson Eleven** is that we must start talking about **climate change** as a poverty problem. Hurricane Katrina is the canary in the coal mine here. What are we doing to help poor places and the people in them prepare for this new 21st century poverty problem? We must, because they'll be affected first and hit the hardest.

It's not all bad news, which is **Lesson Twelve**. Thanks to Social Security, we now know that we can reduce poverty a lot, rather easily. Here we've done it by sending money regularly to older Americans. The Earned Income Tax Credit and SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps) have taught us the same lesson: **Cash and near-cash benefits have significant anti-poverty effects**. More programs can learn this lesson, and trust the research that shows that unconditional cash grants to poor families may be the single most effective intervention available to us. This requires trusting poor people to know what best for themselves —respecting their capacity for self-determination and ensuring that they have a voice in the delivery of services that would help them, as VISTA was meant to do.

Finally, **Lesson Thirteen**. Let's **dispense with the notion**

**that the War on Poverty failed** -- it did a lot, even if it could have done more. There were real successes, and thanks to analysis from the Population Research Center at Columbia University, we know that over the War on Poverty period we've brought U.S. poverty rates down from about 26% to 16%. That's not nearly good enough, but it's not trivial, either.

These are not the only important lessons we might take away from the last 50 years, of course, but they offer one place from which to start thinking about what we should be doing now to fight today's poverty and insecurity. Not all past solutions will be the best ones moving forward — it's not the same world it was then, and we can't build 21st-century antipoverty programs on 20th-century notions of the roots of need. But we now have abundant evidence about what innovations work; all that's left is to find a way to act on it.

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