



Nobody Goes It Alone: Reframing the Poverty Discussion

Why is someone poor? Everyone has different answers, and those answers matter. We need to shift perceptions about those experiencing poverty. We need help crafting a story that inspires people to recognize our commonness and glimpse shadows of ourselves in the struggles of others.



THE ISSUE:

America is built on a myth of self-sufficiency, of pulling oneself up by one's own boot straps. But if we get real with ourselves, we all know that none of us make it in life alone. During moments of crisis, we all feel the same things - fear, vulnerability, isolation. And to overcome crisis, we need the same things - stores of resilience, support from friends and family, and resources to stabilize the ship. This is no different whether you're wealthy or low-income.

WHY IS YOUR STORY IMPORTANT?

If we shift perceptions about those who live in poverty, we will build a social service system that is actually responsive to people's needs - a system based on human-centered design versus a system built to serve a monolithic, faceless "poor." This is a story about empathy - not sympathy - for our low-income neighbors. It's about taking a look at them and, in them, recognizing ourselves.

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The Issue

Background

Many in this nation, on the right and the left side of the aisle are misguided about our prevailing societal images of the people we call “low-income” or “poor.” (This last election season’s “welfare queen” -- throwback debate about food stamps comes to mind.) And this is despite the fact that nearly a third of the U.S. population now falls into these categories and despite the fact that we’ve all lived through this recession together, and we’ve all felt the fear and anxiety that accompanies great economic uncertainty.

Somehow we seem to have decided that the answer to getting over the inevitable shaky ground moments in life should be different for a person of economic privilege than it is for a person of low or moderate income. If we are honest with ourselves, we’ve all experienced times of turbulence, whether it was a health challenge, a divorce, finding childcare in a pinch, or taking care of a sick family member. When we reflect on those times, what it felt like, and how we overcame it, we will realize that regardless of socio-economic status, we all need the same things in times of crisis--money in our pocket, people who have our backs, and confidence in knowing that there is a way out of troubling times.

We’ve all had moments of panic, when we can’t figure out which way is up, whether it’s facing a health challenge, a divorce, finding childcare in a pinch, or taking care of a sick family member. That feeling, “How can I possibly get through this?” is something we all go through, regardless of race or socioeconomic status. It’s a human feeling—not a rich/poor feeling.

On the left side of the street the answer to getting through shaky moments in life tend to focus only on access to resources, on the right side of the street the answer tends to focus on a person’s own internal fortitude. Both tap into a portion of the truth but the universal truth is that we need both of those and a little more. We money in our pocket, people who have our backs, and confidence in knowing that there is a way out of troubling times.

The people too often deemed “moochers” or “dependents” by public figures are the extraordinarily determined and resilient people who actually do want more and are willing to work hard. Many people in this country who have low or no income won’t have access to that aforementioned trifecta, and those of us who do, need to recognize that the people without resources aren’t different than us in what it is they need to push forward.



At LIFT, we have developed immersive experience called LIFTopolis where participants take on the persona and work toward goals of our real life members and try to navigate the modern social services system. We built LIFTopolis as a tool for perception change as participants reflect on what it felt like to have to make tough choices to meet their goals. What we are finding is that almost universally, people walk away with a visceral and emotional sense of empathy—after a recent LIFTopolis simulation, a woman expressed feelings of frustration not being understood after having to take on the role of a Spanish speaking mother. Her feelings turned to dismay and then humility at having realized that she, without thinking, dismisses people who have a language barrier in her own everyday life. It's realizations like that which we want to have. Long term, the hope is to bring the experience of LIFTopolis to the masses via an online platform.

Why is this important?

The point is that none of us makes it in life alone. To deny that people of relative privilege haven't had helping hands along the way -- the right connections, the right friend, or simply what money can provide -- is to draw a false distinction. Pulling oneself up by the bootstraps is as much a myth as the notion that having a job alone can move a person out of poverty. These are myths that get in the way of how we talk about and fight poverty in this country. But it seems to be ones that we hold onto for dear life. We must rethink our relationship with each other and it will allow us to rethink our relationship with this issue.

How this issue has played out in the public:

There's misunderstanding brewing: A recent study by the Salvation Army showed that while the public is sympathetic to the poverty crisis, it at times misunderstands the reasons why so many live in poverty. This misunderstanding contributes to a lack of empathy being felt and a lack of will to help do something about it. Almost half agreed that a good work ethic is all you need to escape poverty while 47 percent believe if poor people received more assistance, they would take advantage of it. Others were less forgiving. Many felt that that if poor people want a job, they could always find a job, while 27 percent said people are poor because they are lazy and 29 percent said they usually have lower moral values.



There's a belief of an inescapable trap: Almost three out of five people surveyed said poverty is a trap some people just can't escape no matter how hard they try while more than half believes it's not possible to eliminate poverty in our society. About a third said there is "really nothing much I can do to help poor people."

The deeper reactions that seem to be pervasive are disassociation and fear. What's unsaid, and what people seem to be unable to face at times, is that it could be them on the opposite side of the income fence. With the shrinking middle class and the state of the economy, what's a bit more real is that we are all just teetering on the edge and one extra bill, one loss of child-care, one sick parent, is all that it would take to send us rolling off solid ground. This is why it's important to shed light on the poverty issue from a human centered point of view. To let the bridge between classes be built on empathy and recognition of emotions that are true for us all, regardless of what caused them.

Goals

The immediate goal is for people to identify the shared experiences we have in common—these experiences are about humanity, not all about rich or poor. Let's face it, wherever we are in life, let's acknowledge that along the way, we needed help—maybe that's a dedicated teacher, mentor, a subsidized small business loan, government assistance, a shelter, a friend's recommendation. It's also true that sometimes money just isn't enough to get us out of a situation. We need people, we need resources, AND we need hope for the future.

This realization can shift attitudes as we get into the dialogue about poverty and who is "poor" in America. The hope is to garner an understanding that the answer through shaky ground moments is the same for us all. We want to put the humanity back into the forefront of our work and inspire Greater empathy - not sympathy - for our low-income neighbors. We want people to see themselves reflected back in the experiences of these neighbors. We want people to realize that feelings of panic and desperation are ones that we can all identify with and if we can focus on the humanity of shaky ground moments, then perhaps we can identify with and be more compassionate when it comes to our neighbors who are low-income and poor and help build programs that address what we all need to get off of that shaky ground-- money in our pocket, people who have our backs, and confidence in knowing that there is a way out of troubling times. That attitude shift alone can alter the 'us vs. them' mentality that has persisted in this country and help to accelerate progress and innovation in this area.



The long term goal is that we can use this attitude shift as a new lens through which we can innovate policies, systems, and models for addressing poverty long term—the lens by which we can take a human centered approach to fighting poverty through individual ownership of the issue and through government and nonprofit programs.

The challenge in all of this is that people will have to confront the fact that “poor” people are more like them than they may like to think. The word poor is deemed bad (and thus the group of people that it is applied to) and we differentiate ourselves from those “bad” people causing an ‘us vs. them’ rift to happen. We need to confront this head on and ask that people acknowledge the shared humanity of us all—regardless of how scary it might feel in the moment.

Specific ideas/hooks/concepts

- Nobody Goes It Alone: There’s a myth that people who do well in life have gotten there by their own hard work. Quite the contrary is true. In a time when it’s all about who you know, it’s surprising that this sentiment still exists. What’s true is that regardless of socio-economic status, we all need the same things in times of crisis--money in our pocket, people who have our backs, and confidence in knowing that there is a way out of troubling times. A middle income mother and a low income mother who loses childcare need the same thing, childcare. They both experience feelings of anxiety and possibly even frustration. And they both need to be able to reach out to people for support. The middle income mom may be to call her friends, post a message on Facebook to find recommendations—why can’t the mom without the fat wallet expect to do the same?
- The myth that if you’re not struggling, then you’ve earned it.
- The myth that poor people are lazy—many of them work and still fall into the poor category or are even homeless.
- The reality that everyone goes through crises and needs the same things to come through it.
- Emotions are the same regardless of income—fear is fear, depression is depression, isolation is isolation.



Facts you can play with

- Having a job alone doesn't push you out of poverty
- 10.4 million low income people have jobs
- Food stamps (now known as SNAP) do help but stereotypes about SNAP and who uses it persist:
- Myth: People who get SNAP don't work. FACT: In 2010 according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the program, 30% of households enrolled in SNAP do work
- Myth: SNAP is a drain on taxpayers. FACT: Every \$1 in SNAP benefits generates \$1.73 in economic activity, according to Moody's economist Mark Zandi. SNAP not only helps low-income people buy groceries, it frees up cash for other expenses, such as medical care, clothing, home repairs and childcare. That benefits local businesses and their employees, which boosts the economy as a whole.
- Check out more on SNAP
- What struggling looks like may surprise you. Even those in uniform who protect and serve our nation are struggling to make ends meet.
- Military families are on a pace this year to redeem more than \$100 million in food aid on military bases.
- The use of food stamps in commissaries increased 9 percent from 2012, when for the full year \$99 million worth of food stamps were redeemed on bases.
- Military commissaries sold some \$31.2 million in goods under the Women, Infants and Children program in 2012.
- Having a job doesn't equal having a home.
- In NYC, More than one out of four families in shelters, 28 percent include at least one employed adult, city figures show, and 16 percent of single adults in shelters hold jobs.
- Note to the statistician and data types: I would love to have more stats like these that take myths like "poor" people are lazy moochers and tell a different story. Imagine seeing a uniformed officer in a food stamp line. A hardworking man or woman giving her all and smiling at work like you and me going to stand in a shelter line at the end of the day.



Guidelines

- We don't want to alienate either side of the aisle, politically. Both sides have points.
- We don't want to point fingers...we do want to inspire thoughtfulness and inward facing reflection.
- We don't want to give off a sense of "us vs. them".
- We don't want to beat around the bush—let's be transparent and get to the heart of the matter.