



# HOW AMERICANS DEFINE POVERTY

Excerpted From the full report

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY II: AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC OPINION ON POVERTY

**This section forms part of a larger report exploring public opinion on poverty and related issues. To access the full report and learn more, please go to: [OPPORTUNITYAGENDA.ORG/POVERTY\\_TO\\_OPPORTUNITY](https://OPPORTUNITYAGENDA.ORG/POVERTY_TO_OPPORTUNITY)**



## **Section 1**

# **KEY FINDINGS**

- 1.1 Many Americans report having a direct, personal experience with poverty**
- 1.2 Americans define poverty in terms of economic security and basic needs**
- 1.3 More Americans are self-identifying as working class and lower class**

## 1.1

**MANY AMERICANS REPORT HAVING A DIRECT, PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH POVERTY**

The first edition of *A Window of Opportunity* identified a longstanding definitional challenge that makes interpreting available public opinion data on poverty difficult: the significant gap between official government definitions for poverty and the public's understanding and definition. In January 2014, when asked what should constitute the poverty line for a family of four, the average estimate from survey respondents was \$30,000 annually, markedly higher than the official poverty line at the time, which stood at \$23,550. When asked in the same 2014 survey if anyone within their family was “poor”, 54 percent of Americans reported that someone in their own family was poor,<sup>8</sup> a significant increase from 2001 when around a third (36 percent) reported that someone in their family was living in poverty.<sup>9</sup>

Polling data from 2015 and 2016 indicate there has been little change in public understanding of poverty in the last few years. In a July 2016 poll sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute and the *Los Angeles Times*, respondents were asked what they think the highest annual income a family of four can have and still be considered to be living in poverty by the federal government.<sup>10</sup> The average estimate among those surveyed was \$32,293, again, significantly higher than the 2016 poverty threshold for a family of four, which is \$24,500. As of 2015, a large portion of Americans continue to report having a direct, personal experience with poverty. In a survey administered by Ipsos Public Affairs in collaboration with researchers at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in the Bronx, NY, more than half (54 percent) of those surveyed state that they personally know someone who has experienced poverty. As of January 2016, 64 percent of black Americans stated that they personally know someone who has experienced poverty, as do 54 percent of white Americans, only a 1 percent increase for black Americans since 2014 (65 percent) and no change for white Americans.<sup>11</sup>

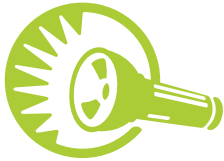
## 1.2

## AMERICANS DEFINE POVERTY IN TERMS OF ECONOMIC SECURITY AND BASIC NEEDS

Americans' widespread experiences with poverty are likely a product of their less abstract and data-driven definition of the issue. While official figures are useful for highlighting the extent of economic hardship, they do little to

capture how those living in economic hardship define their own everyday realities.

When open-ended questions are included, Americans define poverty largely on feelings of economic security and the ability to meet basic needs. For instance, when respondents were asked in a May 2015 survey if they consider themselves to be poor, 73 percent said no. When asked to explain their response, only 6 percent of people stated that their selection was based on "today's standard/definition of poverty." For the 27 percent who self-identified as poor, the most common responses included "don't make enough money," "not working," "living paycheck to paycheck," and "lack of health insurance/health care." For those who do not self-identify as poor, the most common responses explaining why included "have enough/everything I need," "have home/property," "working/have a good job," and "have enough food."<sup>13</sup>



### ***Highlighting the Invisible: Poverty - Technical vs. Perceived***

While federal standards for poverty are defined in concrete income terms, research shows that individual perceptions of what poverty means are nuanced and deeply personal. The difference between formal definitions and lived experiences is crucial to understand when communicating around poverty, and may present an opportunity for developing more effective anti-poverty strategies.

The general public's definition of what it means to be poor in America is further demonstrated by the American Values Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). The American Values Survey includes questions that aim to "identify specific economic challenges Americans face," in addition to questions that enable self-reporting.<sup>14</sup> Respondents were asked to select or list instances when they or someone in their household has personally experienced "economic hardship." More than one third (36 percent) of Americans report that they or someone in their household has experienced food insecurity (defined as having to reduce meals or cut back on food to save money), while nearly 3 in 10 (29 percent) report that they or someone in their household put off seeing a doctor because of financial reasons.<sup>15</sup>

The general public's definition of what it means to be poor in America is further demonstrated by the American Values Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). The American Values Survey includes questions that aim to "identify specific economic challenges Americans face," in addition to questions that enable self-reporting.<sup>14</sup> Respondents were asked to select or list instances when they or someone in their household has personally experienced "economic hardship." More than one third (36 percent) of Americans report that they or someone in their household has experienced food insecurity (defined as having to reduce meals or cut back on food to save money), while nearly 3 in 10 (29 percent) report that they or someone in their household put off seeing a doctor because of financial reasons.<sup>15</sup>

## 1.3

**MORE AMERICANS ARE SELF-IDENTIFYING AS WORKING- AND LOWER CLASS**

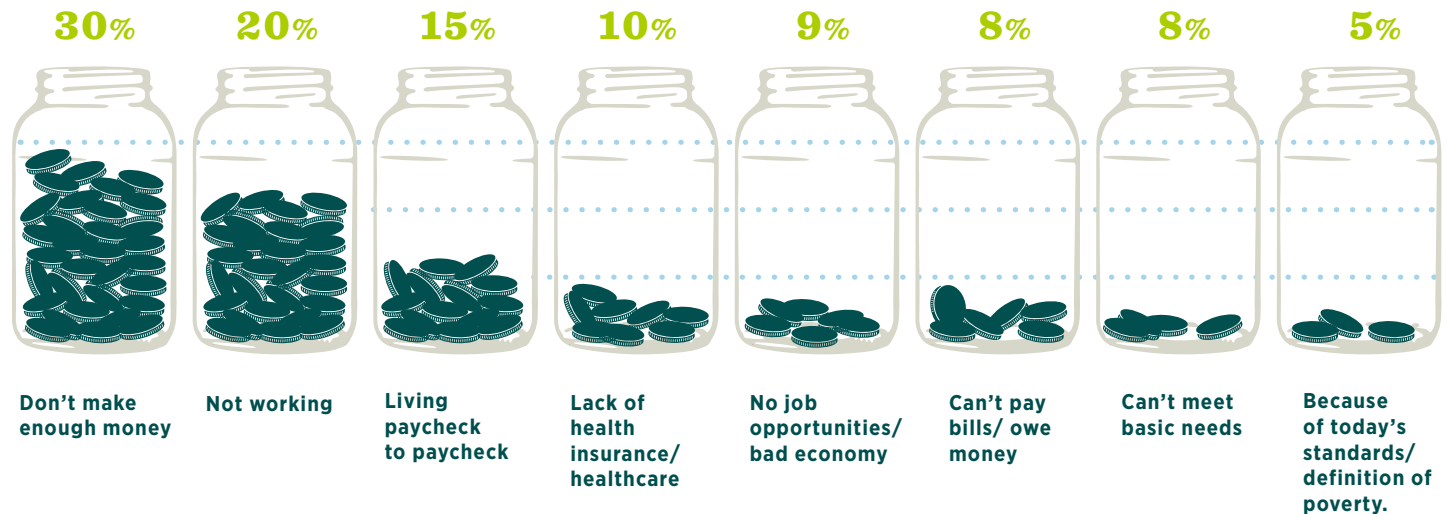
A central finding from *A Window of Opportunity* was the critical role that class identification plays in shaping perception of poverty and support for anti-poverty policies. Lower-income Americans (individuals earning less than \$40,000 per year) emerged in survey and polling data as a key base of support for anti-poverty policies, such as a rise in the minimum wage and the expansion of government-funded job training programs.<sup>16</sup> While an important base of support, prior research has shown that even when people fall within the lower-income bracket, many reject this label and identify as middle class. As noted by Kristen Mickelson and Emily Hazett in their analysis of the attribution of poverty among low-income women, individual class identification is heavily influenced by people's values and aspirations. As such, "even though an individual may not have the monetary resources to be in the middle-class, they believe that they hold the same value system of hard work as the middle-class—thus, they are (or will be) in the middle-class."<sup>17</sup>

In recent years, a growing number of young Americans are self-identifying as working class and lower class. In a recent study, researchers examined data spanning 34 years and found that Millennials (aged 18–35 in 2016) see themselves as less middle class and more working class than any other generation when they were the same age. Only about a third (34.8 percent) of Millennials self-identify as middle class, while 56.6 percent self-identify as working-class. Another 8 percent self-identify as lower class.<sup>18</sup> This compares to 49.8 percent of Generation Xers self-identifying as working-class (aged roughly between 36 and 54 years in 2016), 44.2 percent of Baby Boomers (aged between 55 and 70 in 2016), and only 28.8 percent of those over 70.<sup>19</sup>

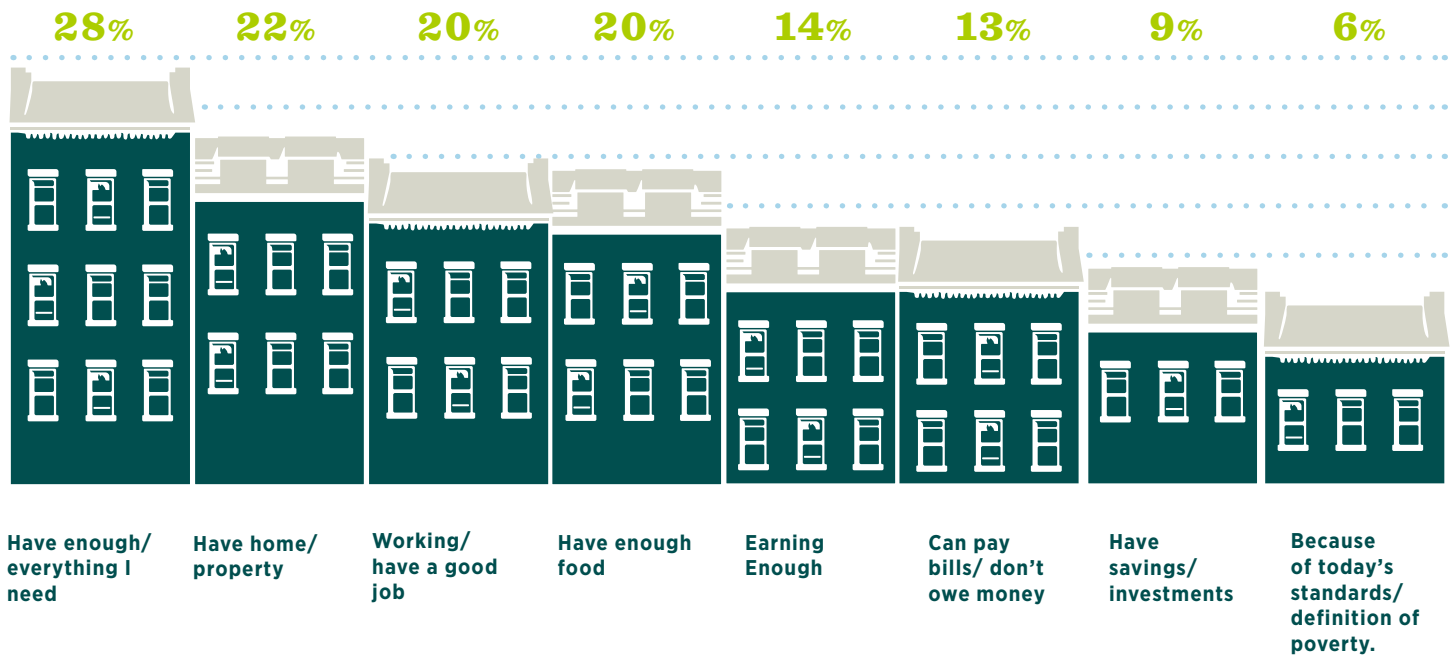
The growth of working- and lower-class identification is also reflected in longitudinal survey data provided by the General Social Survey, a national data program administered by NORC at the University of Chicago, which has tracked public opinion since 1972. Between 2000 and 2014, the percentage of Americans self-identifying as lower class more than doubled, rising from 4.2 percent in 2000 to 9.1 percent in 2014.<sup>20</sup> Between 2012 and 2014, the

## Figure 1: AMERICANS DEFINE POVERTY IN TERMS OF ECONOMIC SECURITY AND BASIC NEEDS\*

### Self-identify as poor because:



### Do not consider self poor because:



Source: College of Mount Saint Vincent, Social Issues in the United States, May 2015.

\*Percentages add to more than 100 percent because multiple responses were accepted.

percentage of Americans self-identifying as working class increased from 44 percent to 47 percent (within a +/- 2.2 percent margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level).<sup>21</sup>

Survey data from Pew Research Center suggests that a key driver of this increase in lower-class identification is Latino Americans. Between 2008 and 2016, lower-class identification among people who self-identified as “Hispanics”<sup>22</sup> increased by 12 percentage points from 8 percent in 2008 to 20 percent as of May 2016.<sup>23</sup> This compares to an increase in lower identification among black Americans from 7 percent in 2008 to 15 percent in 2016.<sup>24</sup> White Americans saw the smallest increase from 5 percent in 2008 to 9 percent in 2016.<sup>25</sup>

Such a shift may have important implications for other public opinion trends. As noted in *A Window of Opportunity*, people living in poverty are viewed by a large segment of the public as having less influence in the public arena. In 2014, only 29 percent of the public agreed that people living in poverty have either a “great deal” or “a good amount” of ability to help change things for the better.<sup>26</sup> Cross-tabulation of data from the Opportunity Survey reveals a strong correlation between class identification and perception of the seriousness of poverty, as well as of people living in poverty. Americans who identify as poor are significantly more likely to think poor people have the ability to change things for the better than those who identify as middle-income or upper middle income (41 percent vs. 28 and 24 percent, respectively).<sup>27</sup> People who identify as poor or low-income are also less likely to attribute poverty to the personal behavior of people living in poverty (11 percent vs. 17 percent) indicating that more Americans are not only self-identifying as working and lower class, but may in turn, increasingly see poor people as potential change agents and poverty as a solvable issue.<sup>28</sup>



# PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS TOOLKIT

*With these tools, tips, and resources, you can communicate about poverty in a way that will build the public will for change.*

## ⚡ 1 TALKING POINTS

### ⚡ 1.1 NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Focus on real-world economic challenges**

Public opinion data suggests Americans' understanding of poverty is less abstract and data-driven. Communications must move beyond official government definitions and instead touch on the real-world challenges facing many Americans, while also highlighting the solutions.

### ⚡ 1.2 ENGAGING STRATEGIC AUDIENCES

#### **Engaging those most affected**

Public opinion research suggests that low-income Americans, while knowledgeable about the realities of living in poverty and interested in change, tend to lack information about structural causes and solutions, and are doubtful about their influence in society. Providing that information, and opportunities for leadership and civic engagement, should be priorities.

### ⚡ 1.3 FUTURE RESEARCH

#### **Avoid stereotypical or negative language in survey design**

The language used in survey and polling questions often makes use of terms or categories that carry negative social connotations, such as “poor” or “lower class”—labels that people may be eager to reject. Sociologists and psychologists have explored at length the social and political forces that influence low-income individuals to reject such categorization and that influence both high- and low-earners to self-identify as middle class, regardless of actual income. More open-ended questions that allow people to self-identify and define the issue of poverty and inequality for themselves should provide more insightful results and improve public opinion research.



#### ⚡ 1.4 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT:

Center for Community Change: How to talk about poverty: Lessons from our communities  
<http://www.communitychange.org/real-power/focus/poverty-message-research-tool-kit/>

### Words to Avoid and Words to Embrace

The Center for Community Change culled from its research words that work and words that push audiences away in the context of talking about poverty and its solutions:

AVOID	EMBRACE
Poor; working poor; low income	Can't make ends meet; living on the brink; working to provide for family
Safety net	Basic living standards; resources for our seniors
Entitlements	Your health and retirement security
The top; the bottom	Wealthiest; poorest
Unemployment rate rose	CEOs fired more Americans; X handed out pink slips
Workers	People, mothers, fathers, servers, cooks, nurses, etc.
Gap between rich and poor	Barriers between rich and the rest of us; obstacles for those struggling
Reform social security/medicare/welfare/etc.	Improve, enhance, shore up social security/medicare/welfare
We	You and I
America's children; future generations; senior on Medicare	"that newborn you swear already smiles"; "your mom going her last round with cancer"
Systemic inequities	Greedy few rigged the game; corporations/CEOs have taken advantage
Fight poverty; war on poverty; casualties of poverty	Barriers to success; obstacles to economic stability
Economic inequality	Economy off kilter; out of balance

## WORK CITED

- 1 The Opportunity Agenda, "A Window of Opportunity: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America," 2014, [http://opportunityagenda.org/files/field\\_file/3.poverty.mediaanalysis.pdf](http://opportunityagenda.org/files/field_file/3.poverty.mediaanalysis.pdf), p. 14.
- 2 Bostrom, Meg, "Achieving the American Dream: A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion Concerning Poverty, Upward Mobility, and Related Issues," 2002 (accessed 16 April. 2016).
- 3 American Enterprise and Los Angeles Times, "2016 Poverty Survey: Attitudes towards the Poor, Poverty, and Welfare in the United States," July 2016, <https://www.aei.org/publication/2016-poverty-survey/> (accessed 26 August. 2016).
- 4 College of Mount Saint Vincent, "Society or the Individual," 2016, <https://mountsaintvincent.edu/society-or-the-individual-root-causes-of-poverty-in-america/> (accessed 10 Feb. 2016).
- 5 College of Mount Saint Vincent, "Social Issues in the United States: Poverty," May 26, 2015, <https://mount-saintvincent.edu/social-issues-in-the-united-states-poverty/> (accessed 10 Feb. 2016).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Public Religion Research Institute, American Values Survey, 2014, <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/AVS-web.pdf>, p. 8, (accessed 10 Feb. 2016).
- 8 Ibid., p. 8.
- 9 "A Window of Opportunity," op cit., pp. 27-28.
- 10 Kristen Mickelson and Emily Hazett, "Why me?": Low-Income Women's Poverty Attributions, Mental Health, and Social Class Perceptions," Springer, 2014, p. 322 (accessed 9 June. 2016).
- 11 The Guardian, "US millennials feel more working class than any other generation," March 15, 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/15/us-millennials-feel-more-working-class-than-any-other-generation> (accessed 18 Mar. 2016).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 NORC General Social Survey, 2000, 2014 (accessed 18 Mar. 2016).
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 The Opportunity Agenda's preferred terms is Latino.
- 16 Pew Research Center, "2016 Racial Attitudes in America III Final Topline," June 2016 <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>, p. 26, (accessed 1 Sep. 2016).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid. WW
- 19 "A Window of Opportunity," op cit., p. 20.
- 20 The Opportunity Survey, The Opportunity Agenda & Langer Associates, 2014.
- 21 Ibid.