

ISSUE BRIEF :: 2015

## **Basic Needs: Ensuring that Every Family Has the Things Needed to Reach Their Full Potential**

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A favorite adage of policy makers addressing poverty in America is “Give a man a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he’ll feed himself for life.”

But, what if the man has no access to a boat ... no nets ... no pole ... no hooks ... no bait ... nor transportation to a waterway? How can he reach his full potential and become a fisherman if he only possesses the knowledge of how to fish, but none of the basic items needed to succeed?

Most people would agree that self-sufficiency is a noble and admirable goal. Most would also agree that people need fair access to the basic needs required for individuals and families to achieve their full potential. People need help to obtain the basic foundations for survival before they can focus on sustaining life beyond mere survival.

Families should not have to live, nor look like they stepped out of a Depression-era breadline, before we as a society step in to help. Plus, once we do help, we need to ensure fair access to basic needs. We should recognize that a child may need to be fed before she can learn in school, that a family may need soap and access to laundry facilities before they can be clean, and that a single mom may need a reliable supply of diapers and child care before she can go to work.

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We have made much progress in the 50-plus years since President Johnson declared a “War on Poverty,” but the 2013 U.S. Census’s Housing Survey reveals that there are still people living in conditions that seem more descriptive of the housing conditions of developing countries than the United States, and bring to question whether or not their basic needs are being met. The Housing Survey is published bi-annually, and chronicles the state of housing in America. It is one of a series of reports that the

## BASIC NEEDS INFORMED CURRICULUM

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Census Bureau publishes on a regular basis in addition to the decennial census survey of the complete U.S. population. Along with the Housing Survey (published in coordination with the Department of Housing and Urban Development) and the American Community Survey, the Census Bureau also conducts a survey of energy use in cooperation with the Department of Energy.

The data from these surveys provide a window into the living conditions of Americans of differing socioeconomic groups. But like any large data set from which data may be selectively highlighted, the public's understanding of the data is too often shaped by the filters through which it is viewed. A 2011 report published by the Heritage Foundation<sup>1</sup> featured data gleaned from the U.S. Census's 2009 Housing Survey and the 2009 Residential Energy Consumption Survey. The Heritage report cherry-picked data from the Census surveys and incorporated a partisan public opinion poll of what poverty "ought" to look like. Upon release, the report went viral. Unfortunately, it remains as a source cited frequently by those who claim the War on Poverty has failed. In the Heritage report, the Census survey data were used to support the notion that because the "typical" family (apparently defined as the bare majority of families) with an income under the Federal Poverty Level possessed certain basic modern appliances, like a refrigerator, the government should not spend any more money on people who did not fit a "public opinion" definition of poverty as "destitution."<sup>2</sup>

We at the National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN) take a different tack; we look at what individuals and families living in poverty lack: namely access to those living conditions so essential to thriving in 21st century America that they can only be called "basic needs":

- adequate shelter with functioning kitchens and bathroom facilities;
- basic utilities of heat, power/electricity, and potable water;
- transportation to work and school;

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1 Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, "Understanding Poverty in the United States: Surprising Facts about America's Poor," *Backgrounder*, Heritage Foundation, Sept. 13, 2011. Full report available at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/09/understanding-poverty-in-the-united-states-surprising-facts-about-americas-poor>

2 *Id.*, 1

## BASIC NEEDS INFORMED CURRICULUM

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- communication tools that allow individuals to reach and be reached by community members, government agencies, and to find and keep jobs;
- nutritious food;
- hygiene products like soap and toothpaste that are essential to maintaining good health.

The U.S. Census data demonstrate there is still great need in this country. NDBN believes that uninformed opinions as to what poverty “should” look like have no place in a reasoned discussion as to what items are necessary to ensure that all Americans have what they need to reach their full potential, allowing them to thrive, and contribute to society.

**Our outrage should not be at how much people living in poverty have, but how much these individuals and families still lack, and how this lack of basic needs inhibits their ability to reach their full potential.**

The Heritage Foundation report outlines in great detail how many people have what the report defines as “luxuries.” Before we deconstruct the report’s impoverished notion of a “luxury”, it is worth noting that every percentage point less than 100 percent represents real children, real women, and real men who live in our country and lack the specific item. Thus, when the U.S. Census Bureau reports that in 2013 48.4 percent of people living in households earning less than \$25,000 (above the FPL for a family of three) have access to the internet, that means that 51.6 percent of people in that same income bracket do not.<sup>3</sup> In an era where private and public, including official governmental, communication is moving more and more rapidly to electronic means rather than paper correspondence or telephone communication, not having access to the internet hampers one’s ability to communicate with state and local agencies, find a job, keep up with the news, receive governmental communication like evacuation warnings and other announcements, or provide children the resources needed to complete their required schoolwork.

When simply reading the U.S. Census reports from the perspective of what basic needs are not met, it becomes apparent that our outrage should not be at how much people living in poverty have, but how much these individuals and families still lack, and how this lack of basic needs inhibits their ability to reach their full potential. According to the 2013 American Housing Survey,<sup>4</sup> there are approximately 18 million

<sup>3</sup> Thom File and Camille Ryan, “Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2013,” U.S. Census Bureau, Report Number ACS-28, Nov. 13, 2014 available at <http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/acs/acs-28.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census, American Housing Survey 2013, available at <http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/ahs/data/2013/national-summary-report-and-tables---ahs-2013.html>

## BASIC NEEDS INFORMED CURRICULUM

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housing units occupied by people with incomes less than 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), which is the official definition of “poor” for the purpose of the Census Surveys and government statistics. These poor households represent 15.8 percent of the nearly 116 million households across the U.S. Of these poor households, 623,000 lack access to a complete kitchen defined as a refrigerator, sink, and stove. Of this subset, 142,000 households have only a microwave to cook food, while another 78,000 households have only burners without a stove or range for food preparation. It is hard to cook nutritious food with only a microwave.

But the pervasive lack of seemingly necessary items goes to issues much more fundamental than cooking and cleaning facilities. Among 78,000 poor households, there is no heating equipment. In 2.2 million poor households, the water is not safe to drink. 380,000 poor households lack some or all plumbing facilities, including 72,000 households which lack piped water, 48,000 which lack a bathtub or shower, and 46,000 which lack a flush toilet. 598,000 poor households reported some severe physical problems with their dwelling, including plumbing, heating, electrical or up-keep.

In percentage terms these numbers are small—less than eight percent of all occupied housing units have problems with drinking water safety, for example. However, these problems disproportionately affect the poor for whom the number is closer 4 percent higher (12%), and who are more than twice as likely as the households above the poverty line (3.2% as compared to 1.4%) to live in homes with severe physical problems. Behind each statistic is an actual family living under the conditions identified. So while the number of households that rely on their cooking stove for heat is a statistical blip, that blip means that there are 67,000 households whose main source of heat is an appliance meant for cooking, not for heating. And nearly half of those households (32,000) fall below the FPL.

None of these statistics exist in a vacuum. Six million, or approximately one-third, of poor households lack a washing machine. If members of those six million are also members of the 10 million households in the U.S. which do not have access to a vehicle, even the act of cleaning one’s clothes becomes much more complicated. Doing laundry requires transporting dirty clothes to a laundromat by public transportation or by foot, making the task certainly more difficult and time-consuming than it is for the 83 percent of American households who do have a washing machine.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the census reports do not provide the Venn diagrams of which populations that lack these basics overlap, but it is not hard to imagine that households that lack one of these commonplace amenities lack others.

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5 U.S. Census, American Housing Survey, 2013, available at [http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=AHS\\_2013\\_C03AO&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=AHS_2013_C03AO&prodType=table)

## BASIC NEEDS INFORMED CURRICULUM

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In general, do Americans expect poor people go without basic necessities? The Heritage Foundation survey asked whether “A family in the U.S. that has a decent, un-crowded house or apartment to live in, ample food to eat, access to medical care, a car, cable TV, air conditioning and a microwave at home” should be considered “poor.” Worded as it was, with no mention of income or whether the hypothetical family is being helped by government assistance programs such as food stamps, housing subsidies, or Medicaid in order to have access to a “basic standard of living,” it is not surprising that 80 percent of Republicans and 77 percent of Democrats agreed that the family should not be considered “poor.”<sup>6</sup>

The survey asks a misleading and in fact wrong question. Better questions are “Do you think a family can thrive in an environment in which they lack decent housing, food, access to medical care, transportation, access to communication networks and basic entertainment?” and “Would you be able to thrive without these things?” It is well documented that public knowledge of what poverty is and the extent of poverty in the U.S. is deficient. A poll conducted by the Center for American Progress and published in 2014 (four years after the Heritage survey) found that Americans overestimated both the income threshold below which one is considered officially in poverty and the number of Americans living in poverty.<sup>7</sup>

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Moreover, many Americans do not realize how many people are just one bad break away from poverty. According to the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau’s calculation of the Supplemental Poverty Measure, which accounts for various forms of federal assistance, nearly one-third (31.8%) of the population has an income of less than twice the poverty level.<sup>8</sup> An inability to pay one’s expenses for a year increases the likelihood of sinking further into the condition of not having enough money to meet “all essential expenses” next year and subsequent years. If families are just able to make all essential expenses on a regular basis, an unexpected expense could destroy their relative stability. A 2013 report by the Hamilton Project of the Brookings Institute, found that even households earning between \$15,000 and \$60,000, or in other words, half of all

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6 Rector and Sheffield, *op cit.* 14.

7 John Halpin and Karl Agne, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty,” Center for American Progress, Jan. 7, 2014, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/report/2014/01/07/81702/50-years-after-lbjs-war-on-poverty/>

8 Jodie T. Allen, Re-Counting Poverty, Pew Research Center Social & Demographic Trends, Nov. 30, 2011, available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/11/30/re-counting-poverty/>



## BASIC NEEDS INFORMED CURRICULUM

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American families, are “one major setback in income [away from] poverty.”<sup>9</sup>

There is a tendency in anti-poverty programs to focus on providing services and not “stuff” or cash. Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) has evolved from a primarily cash-based assistance program when it was first introduced in 1996 to “end welfare as we know it” to a series of service-based programs such as job training, parenting and relationship training, child care, and transportation. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, only 28 percent of TANF went to basic cash assistance.<sup>10</sup> The value of TANF benefits received has fallen by 20 percent or more in 38 states after adjusting for inflation

from 1996, when the program was first introduced, to 2014.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, far fewer families in poverty receive TANF now than did in 1996, when 68 percent of families in poverty received benefits from TANF. Now, only

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26 percent of poor families receive TANF. For many families, TANF is their only cash income,<sup>12</sup> and their only way to buy the basic needs that are not covered by other assistance programs. Basic needs not covered by other assistance programs are surprisingly many. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, informally known as “food stamps”) and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) are nutrition programs only, and do not cover such basic necessities as toilet paper, toothpaste, diapers, light bulbs, and the like. Indeed, no other governmental program is dedicated to ensuring that families have basic needs beyond food, shelter, and heat. Therefore, families living in poverty lack access to the hygiene products necessary to remain clean and healthy.

Although TANF is the primary funding source for many people living in poor households, a great many people who work are also living on incomes below the federal poverty level. According to the Housing Survey, for nearly 31 percent of poor households, wages and salaries are the *primary* source of income for the family. A total of 36 percent of poor families reported earning wages and salaries as compared to 77

9 Melissa S. Kearney and Benjamin H. Harris, “A Dozen Facts about America’s Struggling Lower-Middle Class,” The Hamilton Project, Dec. 2013 available at [http://www.hamilton-project.org/papers/a\\_dozen\\_facts\\_about\\_americas\\_struggling\\_lower-middle\\_class/](http://www.hamilton-project.org/papers/a_dozen_facts_about_americas_struggling_lower-middle_class/)

10 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Policy Basics: An Introduction to TANF,” June 15, 2015, available at <http://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-an-introduction-to-tanf>

11 Iife Floyd and Liz Schott, “Cash Benefits Have Fallen by More than 38 Percent in Most States and Continue to Erode,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 30, 2014 available at <http://www.cbpp.org/research/tanf-cash-benefits-have-fallen-by-more-than-20-percent-in-most-states-and-continue-to-erode>

12 *Id.*

**Creating false narratives that poor families aren't needy enough because they may not "look the part" or may not be living in the same conditions as poor families of a half-century ago, leads to the misnomer of the "deserving poor."**

percent of not-poor households.<sup>13</sup> And yet, working even full time is often not enough to keep a family fed.

According to the Feeding America's 2014 client survey, *Hunger in America*, 43.9 percent of its client households worked during the past 12 months, and 43 percent of those worked full time while employed.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, over half (54%) of poor households with incomes less than \$25,000 do not participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps. Furthermore, most families pay for their housing, and some quite a lot. Ten million poor families pay 50 percent or more of their monthly income in housing costs.<sup>15</sup> The median percentage of income paid in housing costs for poor households is 75 percent. This percentage includes a surprisingly high number of households, more than 5 million, that paid 100 percent or more of their income in the last 12 months for housing, but even if this number is excluded in the calculation, the median percentage of income paid for housing costs by poor families remains at 47 percent, as compared with 22 percent for the general population.

These statistics represent the housing circumstances of poor families, many of whom benefit from the programs developed as a result of the War on Poverty — food stamps, social security disability, and housing assistance. National support for the War on Poverty in the 1960s was motivated at least in part by "poverty tours" of impoverished regions of the country, mostly rural. These tours highlighted, for the rest of the country, the substandard conditions in which poor people lived. President Johnson and Senator Robert Kennedy were among the politicians who visited homes in Appalachia and the rural south to bring attention to the fact that Americans were living in dilapidated dwellings without electricity or running water. The high profile tours showed what deprivation looked like for the purpose of *putting an end* to deprivation, *not to illustrate* what being poor should look like.

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13 U.S. Census, American Housing Survey, 2013, available at [http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=AHS\\_2013\\_C09AO&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=AHS_2013_C09AO&prodType=table)

14 Feeding America, *Hunger in America*, 2014, 108-109, available at <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/the-hunger-study/>

15 U.S. Census, American Housing Survey, 2013, available at [http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=AHS\\_2013\\_C10AO&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=AHS_2013_C10AO&prodType=table)

## BASIC NEEDS INFORMED CURRICULUM

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The War on Poverty’s aim was to raise people’s standard of living from deprivation conditions. Today, we can celebrate the fact that most people have access to many of the basic needs of the twenty-first century, including food, housing and even “modern” appliances. However, creating false narratives that poor families aren’t needy enough because they may not “look the part” or may not be living in the same conditions as poor families of a half-century ago, leads to the misnomer of the “deserving poor.”

As the data from the U.S. Census demonstrate, we still have a long way to go in this country to ensure that all people have access to the basic needs required for 21<sup>st</sup> century success. People need help once in a while, and sometimes it’s just with the basics.