

# Pushed to the Bottom

The Experience of Poverty in the United States



## Comprehensive Report





# **ATD**

# **FOURTH WORLD**

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*Photo Credit: Rucha Chitnis*

This report is dedicated to the memory of

## **Ronald Doyle Anderson**

*activist and co-facilitator, St. Mary's Center, Oakland, CA.*



## **Ron Anderson**

*(June 20, 1954 – June 26, 2018)*

**“I was very fortunate to facilitate a group of people that I had befriended during homeless times, shelter living, transitional housing, and the experience we embrace at St. Mary’s Center that led us to our own housing and how to give back to our community. This became a very emotional experience for me since I have seen this group at its worst and now at its best — giving, and helping. I’m very proud of them but, most of all, I am very grateful to have been part of their participation in these exercises.**

**I may not be around to see the End of Poverty but I know in my heart that one day the living nightmare will be a bad dream that someone will wake from one day.”**

*— Ron Anderson*

# Acknowledgments

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Thank you to the activists, academics, and practitioners who participated in peer groups in Appalachia (southwest Virginia), Boston, Gallup (New Mexico), New Orleans, New York, and Oakland. Your knowledge is the backbone of this participatory research. We are grateful for your time, dedication, and thoughtful input.

Thank you to the MAP location teams for your time and effort in outreach to participants and in organizing and facilitating peer groups. Your dedication has made it possible for this project to be conducted nationwide in both urban and rural areas of the country, allowing us to pursue a better understanding of poverty in all its forms.

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*(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")*

Langston Hughes, 1902–1967

## Introduction

Poverty goes much deeper than just income level. Poverty means having to swallow your pride when accessing a much-needed subsidy, knowing that your children are not receiving the same quality education as their peers, being trapped in a run-down community that lacks resources, being told to be grateful for the little bit you do have and being shamed if you are not. These are some of the essential aspects of poverty.

This report presents a unique voice in the discussion of poverty in the United States by merging three types of expertise: knowledge about poverty from academic experts who study it, knowledge from social workers and others who work alongside people living in poverty, and knowledge about poverty from people who experience it every day. For the remainder of this report, we will refer to these groups as academics, practitioners, and activists. *Activists* is the term chosen for themselves by the people living in poverty who designed this research. This word recognizes the ways in which they are active in working to improve their communities and reflects their desire not to be labeled based on their socioeconomic status. The

name was later extended to peer-group participants who had an experience of poverty to underline the transformative knowledge they contributed.

President Lyndon B. Johnson announced the War on Poverty during his State of the Union address more than fifty years ago.<sup>1</sup> This major federal initiative to address poverty has been mired in controversy ever since, with critics saying that “Americans are no better off today than they were before the War on Poverty began.”<sup>2</sup> This is a stark contrast to supporters, who note that continuous budget cuts have eroded the programs put in place under the War on Poverty initiative, and led to the level of persistent poverty today. The debate took a new turn in 2018 when the Trump administration declared the War on Poverty as “largely over and a success.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Lyndon. January 17, 1968: State of the Union Address. UVA Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-17-1968-state-union-address>

<sup>2</sup> [https://abetterway.speaker.gov/\\_assets/pdf/ABetterWay-Poverty-PolicyPaper.pdf](https://abetterway.speaker.gov/_assets/pdf/ABetterWay-Poverty-PolicyPaper.pdf) p. 4

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Expanding-Work-Requirements-in-Non-Cash-Welfare-Programs.pdf> p. 29

In December 2017, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, conducted a two-week official tour to document poverty in the United States. At the end of this visit, in Washington, D.C., he told the press, "The United States is clearly one of the richest countries in the world. It clearly has levels of technological and other innovation that is the envy of all. Its people have a work ethic which is extraordinary, but coupled with all those achievements are the statistics which are pretty well known [...] The US infant mortality rate is the highest in the developed world, Americans can expect to live shorter and sicker lives than any other in a rich democracy, inequality levels are already higher than in most European countries, [...] neglected tropical diseases are making a comeback: hookworm in Alabama in the 21st century. The youth poverty rate is the highest across the OECD — the rich countries club. The US ranks 35th out of 37 in the OECD in terms of poverty and inequality [...] The point is a simple one; that the contrast between the way in which those in the bottom 20 percent of the population exist is in dramatic contrast to the wealth that is in the country and is being further exacerbated by current trends."<sup>1</sup>

The exacerbation of those economic and social trends confirms that poverty in America remains a battlefield, where the forces at play are social, cultural, historical, and political. The concept of poverty has been shaped over centuries by the power struggle of racial and cultural divides that structured American society. Poverty traps people perceived as poor in a power structure that is far beyond their influence to change yet impacts every part of their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Alston, P., press conference, Friday, December 15, 2017, Washington D.C. [VIDEO]  
<https://www.facebook.com/AlstonUNSR/videos/533327963714410/>

Over the last decades, the War on Poverty seems to have evolved to being a war on people in poverty, "a state of psychological warfare."<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, the social mainstream sees people living in poverty as deserving of blame for their situation despite acts of resistance to these circumstances and the degrading labels they endure. "Society criminalizes the poor... and the poor start to believe that they are guilty of being poor."<sup>3</sup>

The complexity of poverty and the daily experience of people living in it convinced ATD Fourth World to help clarify what poverty in the United States is today. A research project on the Multidimensional Aspects of Poverty (MAP) — part of a larger international project co-conducted by Oxford University and the International Movement ATD Fourth World — was launched in the United States in 2016. It aimed to look at poverty as a collective experience beyond abstract figures and individual trajectories. The participatory research project presented in this report uncovers a new understanding of poverty as a process of subjugation, encapsulated in the words of one activist in Oakland: "We are constantly pushed to the bottom."<sup>4</sup>

## The Multidimensional Aspects of Poverty Research Project

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<sup>2</sup> M. Wallen, 2017 – Throughout this report we intermix quotes from the co-researchers on the U.S. research team and participants from each of the three types of peer groups. When a quote is cited with an initial and last name it is from a member of the U.S. team. For all other quotes it is cited as activist, academic, or practitioner, noting only the peer group and the location to ensure confidentiality of participants.

<sup>3</sup> Activist, Oakland, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Activist, Oakland, 2017

To identify the different aspects of poverty is a global challenge that became even more pressing after the United Nations defined their first goal in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda: “End poverty in all its forms everywhere.”<sup>1</sup> This ambitious goal affirms that poverty exists in different forms and that it is global. *Everywhere* includes for the first time in a United Nations development agenda the wealthiest countries in the world, including the United States. This goal also raised the question of who will define what all the forms of poverty are. Certainly, academic researchers are important contributors. But can poverty be defined without the involvement of people who live in poverty every day?

Traditionally, certain types of knowledge are valued while others are dismissed. An insightful comment made by a researcher

with an impressive job title has more weight in conversations about poverty than the same comment made by someone who has gained knowledge through direct experience.

When people in poverty speak, other people rarely listen. When people in poverty share their truth, their words are often dismissed because their experiences seem so foreign, so distant from those of the majority of people in our country, that they are considered untrustworthy. Beyond the

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<sup>1</sup><https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>



unbearable human cost, this mistreatment results in the loss of a valuable source of insight and understanding.

The MAP research project used an approach called *Merging Knowledge*. For more than twenty years, ATD Fourth World has used the Merging Knowledge approach in Europe to bring together people with different experiences to engage in dialogue about social issues. The dialogues involve academics; people living in poverty; and teachers, social workers, and others whose occupations engage them with people in poverty. This approach not only brings people from different backgrounds together around a table, but also creates an

environment of mutual trust and respect in which all participants feel that they are on an equal footing. This is achieved by having groups of *peers* from similar backgrounds first talk together about a particular topic

free from the influence of people from a different background. For people going through the hardships of poverty, the time spent in multi-session peer groups is particularly beneficial: hearing the ideas and experiences of people who face similar difficulties can trigger a process of recognizing their own suffering and realizing that their situation is not their own fault. For some participants, the process can break their isolation and help to build personal agency by developing their tools and skills in defining their own experience of poverty. As Yama Wilson, a member of the national research team from New York

City, said, "I didn't have the words to describe how I felt before, but now I can put the words to those experiences."<sup>1</sup> Once members of each peer group have discussed issues among themselves, they then get together with other peer groups to identify common ideas and lessons.

Along with using the Merging Knowledge approach, what made the MAP research project unique is that people with an experience of poverty were involved from beginning to end, not as research subjects, but as equal members of the national research team.

In the United States, the national research team had a balance of members who lived in poverty and members who did not. Also, the coordinators deliberately created a team that reflected as much as possible the racial and geographic diversity of the United States and that included members from both rural and urban areas.<sup>2</sup>

The national research team designed tools to implement the Merging Knowledge approach in the American context, facilitated peer groups, and analyzed the data from the meetings. A total of twenty-three peer-group meetings took place, in Appalachia (southwest Virginia), Boston, Gallup (New Mexico), New Orleans, New York City, and Oakland (California). Following these meetings, the national research team presented its work at a national Merging Knowledge session attended by peer-group participants from across the United States. The national

research team is also the collective author of this report.

The results presented in this report were validated throughout the research by feedback from peer-group participants. During a national seminar held in New York City in June 2018, delegates from each peer group reviewed the aspects of poverty identified by the national research team and agreed on the definitions.

## Summary of Findings

After three years of research, we have the evidence to show that poverty is the result of a process of subjugation. For different reasons and in different ways, subjugation takes away people's freedom of choice and control over their own lives. The process gives power to some people while making it out of reach for others. It has seeped into institutions and policy, and has caused the marginalization of specific segments of the population, denying them resources, services, and voice.

Subjugation allows for poverty to exist and become multidimensional in the United States. It forces one part of society to live in disadvantaged areas where residents are viewed as suspect just because they live there.

Poverty is a lack of basic resources to the point where people are merely surviving, not living. One practitioner described resources as "just enough to set people up to fail. The human-to-human aspect of services is missing,"<sup>3</sup> leaving another practitioner "wondering how many times people can tell you 'no' before you stop asking?"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Y. Wilson, 2017

<sup>2</sup> The national research team consisted of two coordinators, five activists, two academics, and one practitioner. The team also reflected the diversity of the United States, including men and women, and African American, Native American, immigrant, and LGBTQ members from rural and urban areas.

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<sup>3</sup> Practitioner, Appalachia, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2017

Work- and employment-related hardships — such as unemployment and under-employment, zero-hour work weeks, and lack of benefits and a living wage — are prevalent, meaning many people barely scrape by.

Poverty takes a toll on physical and mental health. The voice of people in poverty is often silenced or ignored; they are excluded from participation, and many are left to live in isolation. Shame and stigma become symbiotic for people experiencing poverty to the point where programs that were created to offer relief instead become a means of *othering*. "There are food pantries to help people in poverty, but for some that may be a support system and for some that could be something humiliating. Even if it exists, it doesn't support the person; it's humiliating."<sup>1</sup>

All these different aspects of poverty lead to the struggle — the striving to achieve more for yourself and family while also contending with the resentment of living under subjugation and having no control over it.

The national research team identified other factors, described as constants and aggravators, which surround the nine aspects of poverty named in this report and which exacerbate the experience of poverty.

One of the most surprising findings that have come out of the research is that not having enough money to live on was not named as the biggest concern when considering the aspects of poverty. Money and financial difficulties were mentioned and discussed, but other aspects consistently rose to the top. Money may temporarily help an individual, but a slight increase in personal funds has no effect on the multiple other hardships that people experience and

have no control over. "After Hurricane Katrina, people got checks from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but that money didn't last long."<sup>2</sup> A short-term increase in income cannot compensate for decades of underfunded and failing school systems, high unemployment rates, or marginalization. As one practitioner said, "Many people in poverty can live through a lack of resources, but having a lack of community and human connection can destroy a person in poverty. Being a practitioner is not just about providing resources; it's about creating a community for someone who has been in poverty."<sup>3</sup>



It should be noted that activist participants also talked about the positive aspects of their lives; for example, being advocates for others, volunteering in their community, and expressing themselves by writing poetry. They also talked about the *camaraderie* created by poverty: "You know what it feels like to go without, so if you can, you share what you have with someone who needs it."<sup>4</sup> It was remarked that even when poverty is long-term, it isn't always consistent. "It's not always constant drudgery. There are good days and bad days. Sometimes you feel like you can breathe a little and some days

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<sup>1</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2017

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<sup>2</sup> D. Mauss, New Orleans peer group facilitator, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Practitioner, Oakland, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Activist, Boston, 2017

it's really, really bad, and you don't know if you're going to make it through it."<sup>1</sup>

Almost all the activist participants spoke of love: for their children, their families (immediate, extended, and chosen), and their communities: "There needs to be more love in the world,"<sup>2</sup> "Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries,"<sup>3</sup> and "I love who I am as a person and my abilities."<sup>4</sup> One peer group even named love as one of the aspects of poverty: "In poverty, believing in something in a relationship gives you an opportunity to change. Having connections to family, freedom to practice religion, and support allow us to feel and show love. But, living in poverty without love, we feel sick, distant from others, like there is no control in our lives, angry, divided."<sup>5</sup>

At this point, we want to acknowledge that we have inevitably failed to include certain identities, experiences, places, communities, issues, etc., which only speaks further to the complexity of poverty in the United States, especially considering the size of the country and the diversity of its people. For that reason, when discussing how people may experience poverty, we have specified which peer group the speakers are from in order to add context to the insights they shared with us. We cannot claim to present a full picture of the issues, with all their complexity and depth; but we believe that our findings grasp some aspects of a collective experience and that they serve to expand the conversation on poverty in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Broxton, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Activist, Boston, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Academic peer group, Oakland, quoting Dalai Lama XIV, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Activist, Boston, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Activist, Gallup, NM, men's group. In Gallup, participants decided to conduct separate peer groups for women and men to allow participants to speak more freely.

## Some Consequences of the Merging Knowledge Approach on Research on Poverty

Merging Knowledge recognizes that there is truth in the experience of non-scientific people and that this truth could emerge from a step-by-step dialectic process involving a series of discussions among different peer groups.

The Merging Knowledge approach has epistemological significance: it expands the usual definition of knowledge by postulating that truth comes from a common understanding among different people while also challenging the very notion of truth (in a similar way to the progress that has been made in non-colonialist or feminist epistemologies by researchers taking stock of the lessons learned from situated knowledge and theories of knowledge that reflect a context and start from a viewpoint). The Merging Knowledge process and the consistency of the knowledge theory it is based on represent an ethic that is absolutely key in the field of research on poverty.

Merging Knowledge is a scientific approach to the creation of new knowledge. It is also an attempt to challenge the standard model of poverty research. Including people living in poverty as researchers may modify the conceptual frame about how to think about and understand poverty. A research participant told us, "One major thing this research and work does well is help collectively educate people, even folks who 'study' this."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2018

The first step of the Merging Knowledge process consists of building on the specificity of each type of knowledge by allowing members of each group to work together with their peers, where they gain trust and understanding and formulate their collective knowledge. This initial time spent with peers is particularly important for people living in poverty who are often challenged by others in their own capacity of understanding, or perceived as having less intellectual and conceptualization ability because they lack formal education. For some people, this time spent together is the first validation of their knowledge (gained through experience) as being relevant and valuable.

There is also a benefit from the peer groups for people without a direct experience of poverty. As one practitioner said, "I think these were probably uncomfortable things to talk about and at some point they didn't feel that way anymore.



"It's important to hear peers talk about poverty too, and use different language that I can adopt and pick up to figure out how this is going to help me think about poverty more; my role in poverty as I work, and how I am going to talk about it with people I work with who experience it."<sup>1</sup> And another stated, "I needed to sit with this discomfort. In a lot of the work that we do, working on behalf of people, [I was] sitting with that,

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<sup>1</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2018

and wondering what it looks like for other people being in a space that's not meant for them."<sup>2</sup>

## Implementation in the Peer Groups

Poverty is a lived experience. For that reason, specific aspects of life also relate to poverty and determine the depth of poverty a person experiences. Approaching poverty through the lens of experience brings the subject to the center and starting point of the investigation. This is why the national research team chose to ask the questions "What do you like about your life?" and "What don't you like about your life?" to begin to determine the different aspects of poverty.

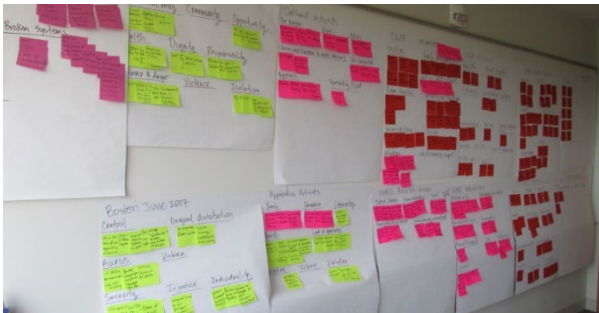
For people living in poverty, this opens two doors simultaneously: one leads to emancipation from shame, isolation, and mental imprisonment; and the other leads to a meaningful contribution to the scientific community and a change in the public perception about people living in poverty. For people without a direct experience of poverty, the two questions allow them to recognize aspects of poverty in their own experiences. The object of the research is no longer external to the researchers anymore, but understood from within, individually and collectively. As an academic in Boston said, "The idea that you could have aspects of your life that do and don't relate to poverty was interesting to think through. When I thought about those dimensions, I thought of the person as the unit of analysis. So much more came out about society, politics, etc., by taking the person as a unit of analysis."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Academic, Boston, 2017

In this research project, once a list of aspects and characteristics of life were named, a list of dimensions of poverty could begin to be determined. Similarities in the aspects and characteristics were identified and umbrella words were then proposed to represent several similar aspects and characteristics. For example, if *home*, *neighborhood*, and *city* were named, they may fit under the umbrella word *environment*, but only if the group agreed to it. Participants were then asked, "How do these different aspects of life connect to aspects of poverty? Are there any categories fundamental to understanding poverty that we have left out?"



The next step was to define the aspects identified. For this process the national team chose a *photo speak* activity. Participants looked at a group of pictures and were asked, "Which do you think is most central to understanding poverty?" Participants showed the photo they had chosen and explained the reasoning behind their choice. They were then asked, "What characteristics emerge when considering what is most central to understanding poverty? Do these characteristics fit into the aspects already discussed, or are they new aspects?" The conversation that developed from these questions formed the basis of the definitions for the previously identified aspects.

Once the aspects were named and defined by peer-group participants, a *merging* took place within the national research team. The

academics, activists, and practitioners within the team formed groups with their respective peers to analyze the data from their corresponding groups.

Each group first identified similarities in the aspects and definitions determined by their participant peer-group counterparts. As was done in the peer groups, similar aspects and characteristics were sorted into clusters to determine if there was an overall concept that might capture their meaning.

Each group then considered how to name each cluster of aspects and characteristics. The national research team then regrouped as a whole to present the clusters and explain the reasoning behind each one. The same process of identifying aspects and characteristics among the clusters created from three forms of knowledge was used to create a collective knowledge from which the final aspects emerged. During this process, the national research team also began to notice certain themes emerging — those were race, gender, time, uncertainty, and choice — that affected many of the aspects. These themes evolved into the constants and aggravators that are presented below. The resulting nine aspects along with the constants and aggravators were then reviewed, edited, and confirmed at a national Merging Knowledge session attended by forty peer-group delegates from the six U.S. MAP locations.





# Subjugation



"When you live in poverty, you are always under somebody's thumb."  
- Activist, Boston

## Disadvantaged Areas:

"You are stuck in a place. You don't choose or pick a place. It's chosen for you and you have to deal with it."  
- Activist, Gallup

## Work- and Employment-Related Hardships:

"In our capitalist society people in poverty lose their value because they no longer produce wealth."  
- Practitioner, NYC

## Voice and Participation:

"No voice, no access."  
- Activist, Boston

## Resources:

"The poorest get the worst."  
- Activist, NYC



## Social Isolation:

"People isolate us because of our poverty, and once you are isolated, you start to self-isolate."  
- Activist, Gallup

## Health and Wellbeing:

"A sick child with rich parents is going to be better off than a child with poor parents. Health is an outcome of poverty."  
- Academic, Boston

## Stigma and Shame:

"Here, in the U.S., who you are is defined by what you have. When you have not much, you are not much."  
- Activist, NYC



## Racism:

"The racism and criminalization that occur in public spaces..."  
- Activist, Oakland

## Uncertainty:

"Any hiccup in your day will be bigger for someone in poverty than for someone not in poverty."  
- Academic, Boston

## Time:

"You die sooner."  
- Activist, New Orleans

## Social Identity:

"Being a white female from a rural area we're viewed as uneducated; our accent is an embarrassment for many."  
- Practitioner, Appalachia

## Hard Choices:

"You have to choose what's most important to pay for. The home, electric, water, come first and other material things come second."  
- Activist, Gallup

## Accumulation of Dimensions:

"Some of the problems that people may have may be solvable, but when there are so many issues, it is hard to use your problem solving skills."  
- Activist, Gallup

# The Struggle



"People will try to bring you down, but you still have something inside; that spark."  
- Activist, Boston

# Conclusion

Poverty is the product of interactions that limit freedom and choices for some. All of us create poverty whether we are aware of it or not. This means that poverty is not inevitable. All of us, together, can overcome it.

For readers who wish to explore this research in greater depth, a full report is available online at [map.4thworldmovement.org](http://map.4thworldmovement.org).

## The Aspects of Poverty in the United States

The nine aspects presented here were determined by the national research team and then reviewed and validated by delegates from each U.S. research location at a national Merging Knowledge session.

### Subjugation



The main definition of subjugation is "power over individuals and communities."<sup>1</sup> In the United States, a dominant segment in society exploits and takes advantage of other people, wielding power over individuals, communities, and sovereign Native American nations. This phenomenon seems connected to the role of hatred, the trauma of genocide, slavery, and segregation in the history of America and to the myth of the American dream – *If you work hard, you will be successful* – a dream that is inaccessible for people at the bottom of the social scale in a country characterized today by its lack of social mobility.

Subjugation creates and supports dehumanization across a wide spectrum that goes from criminalization of people experiencing poverty to passive acceptance of the fact that no one cares about *those people*. "If you don't consider me worth something, it is easier to take advantage of me."<sup>2</sup> Subjugation is also linked to a tolerance of the idea that some people are

worthy and others are worthless. The label *those people*, when talking about people living in poverty, is a mark of dismissed identity. This distinction is embodied in U.S. society through oppression, exclusion, systemic violence, institutional practices, discriminatory policies, and a refusal to honor the history of communities.

Subjugation is evident in all forms of attacks based on origin, address, who you are, who you are perceived to be, and so forth, preventing people from advancing or succeeding.

Poverty-based subjugation flourishes because of the mistaken perception that there is no commonality of morals and values between the middle class and the lower social classes, with the middle class having a higher standard and the lower having little or none; that higher income corresponds with higher morals and values, while lack of income or low income confirms the absence of morals and values.

This results in violence being perpetrated both against people experiencing poverty and within their communities; deprivation of a political voice in the form of representation or enfranchisement; denial of access to a safe, clean living environment with adequate resources; removal of possessions; constraints on and violations of freedom of choice; and pitting one against another to keep power in the hands of the few and maintain the social hierarchy. "By purpose, people are put in one place to keep them apart."<sup>3</sup> "They build forced communities based on income. The

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. research team

<sup>2</sup> U.S. research team activist

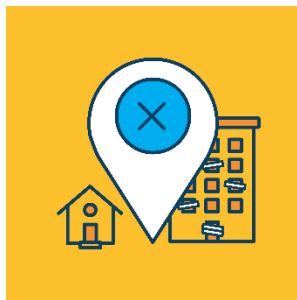
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<sup>3</sup> Oakland activist

concentration of poverty creates broken communities."<sup>1</sup> "You are always under somebody's thumb."<sup>2</sup> "When you get involved in the social system, you don't have voice or choice anymore."<sup>3</sup> "The system is not designed to evolve out of it. It keeps us in a constant phase of being below. The system put you in a situation and blames you for this situation. It is sometimes like you have to steal your way out of poverty."<sup>4</sup>

Subjugation results in unfair and inequitable treatment and refusal to give protection under the law. Some people in poverty are forced to resist subjugation because they don't have what they need to survive, but this resistance is often criminalized, further advancing the cycle of violence. "The police don't go after people in wealthy areas."<sup>5</sup> "The only choices you have are bad choices."<sup>6</sup>

## Disadvantaged Areas



Some people are forced to live in specific areas where there is a concentration of very hard aspects of life: these are the disadvantaged areas. "We are forced to the

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<sup>1</sup> Appalachia activist

<sup>2</sup> Boston activist

<sup>3</sup> New York activist

<sup>4</sup> Oakland activist

<sup>5</sup> Boston activist

<sup>6</sup> Gallup activist men's group

bottom."<sup>7</sup> The geographic concentration of the aspects of poverty not only worsens the consequences of poverty, it constitutes an aspect of poverty by itself.

Disadvantaged areas can be found in both urban and rural parts of the United States. They are a direct result of policy, and in some instances a deliberate creation of policy. These communities are under-resourced in many ways, including lack of jobs (high rates of unemployment and underemployment), underfunded and failing schools, *food deserts*, failing infrastructure, residential segregation, lack of access to affordable health care or any health care, lack of political representation, and poor water and air quality (presence of chemicals and lead) affecting the health of people living there. Some describe this as "a state of psychological warfare"<sup>8</sup> where a person's mind is broken down, where there is resentment and an inability to function. "They put you in a crappy place, don't give enough services and 'hopefully' you die in this crappy place because that's all you deserved."<sup>9</sup>

Disadvantaged areas are at the same time over-policed and under-policed. There is a heavy law-enforcement presence that views the people living in these areas as criminal or suspect – the broken windows theory<sup>10</sup> – and "the racism and criminalization that occurs in public spaces"<sup>11</sup>. Yet, police intervention is missing when residents of these areas become victims of crime and need help. Some rural disadvantaged areas are experiencing population drops because

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<sup>7</sup> Oakland activist

<sup>8</sup> M. Wallen, 2017

<sup>9</sup> S. Ashley, 2018

<sup>10</sup> McKee, Adam J., "Broken windows theory.

Academic Theory." Encyclopedia Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/broken-windows-theory>

<sup>11</sup> Oakland activist

the people who can leave go elsewhere to seek out more opportunities — jobs, health care, and better education for their children. In urban areas, people in distressed communities face less and less affordable housing and more and more gentrification, seeing housing improvements that they know are not meant for them and that push them out of their communities as rents increase. This has led to an increasing homeless population and homeless encampment in some major cities.

In both rural and urban disadvantaged areas, residents face location-based stigma, prejudice, and judgment. "You live there so you must be like that"<sup>1</sup>; "We're not like those people"<sup>2</sup>. They also experience discrimination when they seek employment and give their zip code and area code, which can show where they live. This stigmatizing environment creates division within the community, with some people adopting respectability politics by distancing themselves from their peers to be better accepted by society at large. These dynamics increase the shame felt by some people and leads others to internalize their pain, suffering in silence. "You are stuck in a place. You don't choose or pick a place. It's chosen for you and you have to deal with it. You are not good enough."<sup>3</sup>

There is a high incidence of drug and alcohol use in both rural and urban distressed areas. The residents see this as not just a symptom of the area, but as an attack on them, themselves: they feel preyed upon and taken advantage of. People in rural areas where there is a high incidence of opioid use have questioned why doctors prescribe opioids so freely when they know there is a problem in their area. In urban areas, they question why so many liquor store permits

are given out by the local government for their neighborhoods as opposed to other neighborhoods, "...making it look almost inviting."<sup>4</sup> In both rural and urban areas, residents recognize that businesses become more friendly to them on the 1st and 15th of the month, when people receiving government subsidies usually receive their benefits; indeed, they notice that prices in local stores slightly increase on those dates.

The families living in these areas become fragile because of the constant struggle to sustain themselves and survive in an area where *lack of* is the only thing in abundance. This struggle also causes families to face added scrutiny of their parenting skills when people assume that they do not know how to adequately care for their children, as opposed to there not being enough resources to help care for children. This heightened scrutiny adds an extra layer of anxiety for heads of households — both women and men, in urban and rural disadvantaged communities — who fear that their children might be taken away. The trauma-induced stress caused by living in these areas can have lifelong effects, even if a person is able to move to a more economically stable area.

**“You are stuck in a place. You don’t choose or pick a place. It is chosen for you and you have to deal with it.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Boston activist

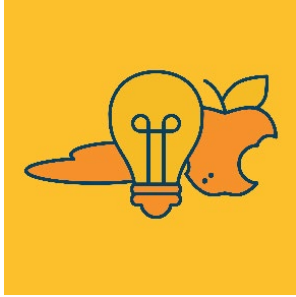
<sup>2</sup> S. Ashley, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Gallup activist men’s group

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<sup>4</sup> Boston activist

## Resources



In relation to poverty, resources are the basic necessities and services needed to live — not merely survive — in a dignified way as an individual, as a family, and as a community. People living in poverty are often marginalized and are denied access to even the bare minimum of resources: employment, quality food, housing, land, health care and health services, safety, clean water, quality education, regular income and financial security, clothing, sanitation, transportation, social services, technology, and time. "The poorest get the worst."<sup>1</sup> People in poverty are aware that there is an unequal distribution of resources and cite selfishness and greed as the reason for being denied access to the most basic resources. "We are controlled by the greed of a few."<sup>2</sup>

Housing is the most basic of resources. In urban areas, increasing rents and lack of affordable housing have pushed some people into homelessness. At the same time, subsidies that would help with the cost of rent are being decreased or eliminated. High rents and lack of affordable housing give slumlords free reign to refuse to make necessary repairs, knowing that residents do not have any other housing options. Lack of affordable housing has swelled the waiting

lists for government-subsidized housing for low-income people, creating waiting times that can be ten or more years in some areas. People in public housing have the same complaints as people in poverty who live elsewhere: repairs not being addressed, lack of safety, and risk of losing their housing. People who are homeless face the red tape of qualifying as being homeless, which limits the resources available to them. In larger cities and some rural areas, more and more people are living in homeless encampments.

Education is a resource that can lift people out of poverty. Underfunded school systems can be found in both rural and urban areas. In rural areas, schools are being consolidated because of a drop in population, limiting the amount of funding received for each student, which in turn limits or eliminates arts courses, literacy programs, and "the classes that can help get the jobs that are in this area."<sup>3</sup> This underfunding also means fewer teachers, increased class sizes, less one-on-one interaction between children and educators, and less funding for special-need students. Decreased funding creates an environment of teaching to a government standard only to pass tests, with "too much memorization and not enough learning."<sup>4</sup> In both rural and urban areas, students whose families live in poverty use outdated textbooks and have limited or no access to computers or the internet, unlike their middle-income or more affluent peers.

In rural areas, natural resources are stripped from the land in ways that benefit business while creating hazardous environmental and health conditions for the people in the area, especially people living in poverty who are the least likely to be able to relocate. Harmful residue from farms, factories, and

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<sup>1</sup> Oakland activist

<sup>2</sup> Gallup activist men's group

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<sup>3</sup> Appalachia activist

<sup>4</sup> New York activist

mines prevents neighbors from planting gardens for food or pleasure. Some rural areas lack the infrastructure for water altogether, while clean water (free of chemicals and lead) and sanitation may be lacking in both rural and urban areas.

Public transportation is nonexistent in some rural areas. New, more reliable transportation in some urban areas is the first sign of gentrification, which ultimately forces long-time low-income residents out of their neighborhoods.

In rural areas, it is hard to find a doctor — a two-hour ride to an emergency room or clinic is common — or to persuade doctors to stay in the area. Health care costs prevent people living in poverty in both rural and urban areas from seeking out care until they face a life-threatening emergency. The cost of dental care and lack of dentists are a big concern for people in poverty. Even those with medical insurance coverage cannot find adequate health, dental, or eye care in their area; or they are covered for only a narrow range of procedures, which often excludes the procedures they need.

For people who live in poverty, the resource of time is a luxury. Their time is not considered to have the same value as that of their middle-income counterparts. Because their time is thought to be expendable, they are made to return repeatedly with documents when seeking out much-needed subsidies. They endure zero-hour work weeks (contracts that tie wages to hours worked but do not guarantee a minimum number of hours in a given week) and work schedules that can be increased or decreased without notice and without any consideration of how that affects their lives. There is no time to rest or reflect, no time for family or personal growth or hobbies, and no time to pay attention to health or to continue with education.

## Work- and Employment-Related Hardships



For people living in poverty, work and employment experiences rarely have a positive impact on their life trajectories because of the extreme difficulty of building a career. Most of the time, because of low wages and unfair employment practices, work is not perceived as a way toward a better life situation and provides very little or no access to social and professional networks that open opportunities for advancement.

People in poverty must often hold multiple (sometimes part-time) jobs to earn enough money to sustain themselves or a family. The jobs they have access to often fail to provide benefits (for example, health care and sick days), while at the same time put their health in danger. These types of unpredictable, menial and manual labor jobs coupled with underemployment can lead to anxiety, stress, self-doubt about what they can accomplish and possible eruptions of violence because their jobs don't let them feel useful to themselves, their families, or their communities.

It is hard to find a job and to keep a job. The skills that are learned from experience by people living in poverty are not valued or considered marketable. In the economic sphere, people in poverty are considered and

treated as disposable, and this creates uncertainty and instability in their lives.

On Native American reservations<sup>1</sup> as well as in other rural and urban areas, a majority of employers do not offer full-time employment with health care and other benefits, so most people need two or more jobs to survive. This creates a self-defeating cycle: people arrive at their second or third job already exhausted, leading them to make mistakes that can hurt them or other people or cost them their job. They have no time to rest, to spend with family, or to pursue their own interests or personal development.

People living in poverty also do the most dangerous jobs — working on pipelines, gas lines, coal mines, and assembly lines — and accept low-paying jobs that nobody else wants to do. They risk their health working with chemicals and impose undue wear and tear on their bodies, making them seem much older than they really are from a lifetime of doing manual labor or standing all day at work. When job applicants write their address on an application form, prospective employers may stereotype them as lazy, unreliable, or untrustworthy, and refuse to hire them because of where they live.

The types of employment available to people living in poverty do not pay a living wage. The menial, dead-end jobs they can find do not allow them to develop professional skills and networking connections. This vicious cycle not only limits their own personal growth, but also has generational effects: people living in poverty have no opportunity to build the same social capital or networks available to other people, and to pass the social capital and networks on to their children.

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<sup>1</sup> Segregated areas created by the U.S. Government where Native Americans were forced to live when removed from their original homelands.

The stress and hardship of always being underemployed or unemployed — constant fear of not making enough money to provide for a family, or anxiety about being laid off — can end up tearing a family apart. The pressure of receiving low wages and having to work long hours can lead some people to use drugs and alcohol, or even resort to domestic violence. These individual hardships create challenges that can affect an entire community.

People in poverty want to take "the right path"<sup>2</sup> of traditional employment, but when the system locks you out, some people resort to "the hustle"<sup>3</sup> — taking odd jobs that pay under the table, or off the books, or participating in the underground economy (undeclared income from babysitting, cooking, etc.) — out of necessity or frustration. Others resort to what seem like more lucrative, but far more dangerous, options including drug dealing and sex work. But this is a Catch-22. Participants in these illegal activities can end up with a criminal record that will prevent them from obtaining even the low paying, dead-end, and sometimes dangerous jobs they are trying to compensate for in the first place, thus continuing a vicious cycle. They have the feeling that there is no way out.

Work- and employment-related hardships can affect everyone in poverty, but some groups feel these hardships more than others based on who they are.

For many women in poverty, and especially women of color in poverty, a lifetime of low wages and a gender pay gap make it impossible for them to retire. Most of the employment options for single mothers consist of low-wage jobs during the hours their children are in school (so-called “mothers’ hours”) They face the additional

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<sup>2</sup> Gallup activist men’s group

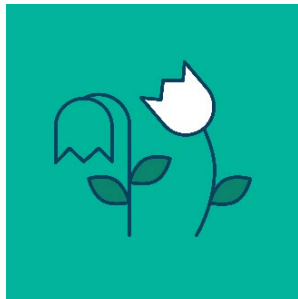
<sup>3</sup> Y. Wilson, 2017

stress of juggling the role of sole provider on a low wage while also providing nurturing care — if they take a day off work to care for a sick child, they risk losing the job that enables them to support that child.

Women in poverty with low-wage jobs are more susceptible to sexual harassment at work. They know they do not have the skills that would allow them to leave their job and find another one, and the perpetrators know this too.

People with immigration status problems also experience work and employment hardships and can often get only "the jobs (that) lie at the bottom of society."<sup>1</sup>

## Stigma and Shame



Stigma and shame are social markers imposed on a specific group of people, consciously or unconsciously, purposefully or not, by collective mechanisms that assign low social value (stigma — externally imposed) to these people or groups of people, which can lead to painful feelings of low self-esteem (shame — internally imposed).

Stigma arises from external judgmental behavior and attitudes: *We are not like them* or *Those people*. This behavior could be individual, collective, or institutional. Being

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<sup>1</sup> New York activist

*othered* leads to social isolation and internalized self-blame or self-oppression. "Who cares about me? Anyway, I am worthless."<sup>2</sup> People living with the multiple hardships of poverty are made to feel ashamed of their living conditions, yet they generally have very little or no control over these conditions.

The stigma and shame phenomenon is a social construct that is internalized by institutions, too. For example, schools can determine the social value given to someone's identity: Which school do you go to? Are you an *at-risk* student or a *difficult child*? Failing schools in disadvantaged areas leave their former students suffering from low social value, low wages, and bleak prospects.

**“Here in the U.S. who you are is defined by what you have. When you have not much, you are not much”**

Stigma arising from the multiple hardships of poverty intersects with other types of discrimination that reinforce one another (for example, race and ethnicity, gender, national origin, sexual identity, immigration status, and religion). But for some people, socio-economic standing seems to be the most consequential circumstance and the most difficult to overcome in a group. "At an event I attended, the wealthy gay shunned the poor gay even though we were all there to support the same cause."<sup>3</sup> This type of *othering* prompts the respectability politics that sustains the phenomenon of social differentiation: *They are not like us*.

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. research team

<sup>3</sup> M. Wallen, 2018



## Lack of Adequate Health and Well-being



This aspect describes chronic external and internal conditions that affect the physical and mental wellbeing of those most affected by poverty. These chronic conditions lead to a shorter life span, curtailed by individual, generational, place-based, or historical trauma that has left its mark as emotional and physical wounds carried by people in poverty and passed from one generation to the next. The hardships are exacerbated by harsh living conditions that include toxic stress, environmental hazards (air, water, and soil pollution), inequality in the health care system, violence, suicides, substance abuse and self-medicating, isolation, and lack of access to basic hygiene services.

A shorter life span pertains to people living with the multiple hardships of poverty regardless of their living conditions or their access to health care. Poor health related to poverty that starts in childhood is carried into adulthood and persists throughout life — for many, a shorter life than for those in better conditions — even if economic circumstances change for the better.

Historical trauma caused by government intervention and subsequent lack of governmental accountability has an enormous impact on the current mental health of people in poverty. Native Americans have extremely high suicide

rates, particularly among the young; high rates of diabetes and heart problems; and high blood pressure, all stemming from the trauma caused by the *boarding school system* where children were taken from their families, placed in boarding schools, and stripped of their culture and language in order to be made more *American*.

Toxic stress — anxiety and stress that result in chemical changes in the brain — caused by historical trauma and poverty-related trauma can trigger mental health issues across generations. Self-medicating with drugs or alcohol has been used to mask mental health problems caused not only by historical trauma, but also by the stress resulting from the multiple hardships of poverty. Additionally, the over-surveillance and intrusion of government in the lives of people in poverty and the lack of trust of government by communities of color results in an under-reporting of mental health distress and undermines any attempted interventions. Even when mental health or substance abuse treatment is sought, it is often not available; and when people in poverty accept treatment, it increases the likelihood that children will be separated from their parents.

People living in both rural and urban areas generally have no control over damaging environmental conditions: lead in the water and soil, and carcinogens in the air, water, and soil. In urban areas, participants have noted used hypodermic needles being disposed of in parks and playgrounds. In rural areas, participants have noted black and brown lung disease due to coal mining and coal dust in the air (Appalachia), and uranium in the ground water and soil (New Mexico).

In rural areas, people often have to travel two hours or longer to have access to medical care or to visit a doctor. In some rural areas, thousands of people travel up to

one hundred miles and wait in lines for up to three days to receive free basic medical care (an eye exam, a physical examination, or dental care) from a volunteer medical organization that serves people who do not have or cannot afford insurance coverage.

There may be more health care facilities in some urban areas, but many people's access is limited due to high costs or lack of insurance coverage. In both rural and urban areas, people in these hardship circumstances try to ignore illnesses, hoping they will subside; they resort to home remedies and turn to emergency rooms as a last resort. Often a small ailment would be manageable with prompt medical care, but failing that, it grows into a more serious problem. In both rural and urban areas, people have reported waiting several hours in an emergency room and then being told to see their primary care physician for follow-up care, even though many of them do not have access to a primary care provider. This is another Catch-22 scenario for people living with the multiple hardships of poverty.

Many people in poverty cannot practice preventive care because they have no access to nutritious food. At the same time, both malnutrition and obesity are prevalent in disadvantaged areas. Living in food deserts and not being able to afford nutritious food, people enduring the multiple hardships of poverty in both rural and urban areas cannot maintain diets that would aid in maintaining health. When available, food pantries can help subsidize a diet, but without those, many people have no access to fresh fruits or vegetables. The food that people in poverty do have access to — outdated, boxed, or canned items; fast food, and low-priced items that are high in sugar, salt, fat, and starch content — is what causes some health problems to begin with, including

diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease.

Dental care is often neglected because even if a person does have some form of health care insurance, dental coverage is rarely included or the services are very limited. In both rural and urban areas, it can be harder to find a dentist than a primary care physician. Lack of adequate dental care affects overall health and causes chronic pain that makes eating difficult, results in multiple tooth extractions, and erodes self-confidence by intensifying the stigma, shame, and self-isolation experienced by people who have difficulty talking or are humiliated when they smile.

Lack of eye care leaves many adults in poverty with limited employment options because of uncorrected vision. Also, sight problems can cause headaches and dizziness and interfere with everyday tasks. Children with poor vision have difficulties in school if they cannot get appropriate care.

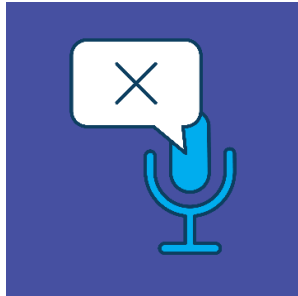
Even when access to health care is available, service providers may be unfamiliar with disorders common among people who have experienced the multiple traumas of poverty and may offer culturally inappropriate options to populations with high rates of poverty, such as people of color, Native Americans, and LGBTQ people. These realities of limited or no access to health care have been described as "Third World country conditions within the U.S., a wealthy country"<sup>1</sup> and "Just enough to keep you alive — sometimes."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Oakland activist

<sup>2</sup> New Orleans activist

## Unrecognized Voice and Exclusion from Participation



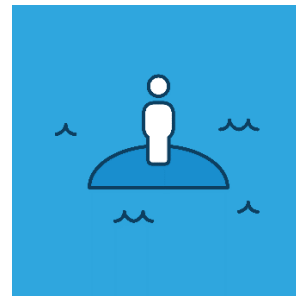
A lack of power and the weight of poverty in its many dimensions prevent people in poverty from exercising their voice. They have learned that they don't matter as human beings, so they do not speak of their hardships or struggles: "No one cares. We don't really matter. We are disposable."<sup>1</sup> Instead, they internalize the injustice and dehumanization they face, and this affects their self-esteem and self-worth — "We learn to suffer in silence"<sup>2</sup> — and can lead to anxiety, serious health conditions, and internal rage. Without a voice, people living in poverty are unable to collectively define themselves and are consequently unable to bear the weight of the labels society places on them.

Those people in poverty who are able to speak out struggle with not being listened to and not being heard. Most of the time, as a U.S. research team activist said: "We don't want to speak to complain, but to exist."<sup>3</sup> The unrecognized voice of people in poverty prevents the public from knowing "the real deal of what it is to live in poverty."<sup>4</sup> Poverty is commonly defined by academics, economists, and policymakers without the

input of the people who actually live in poverty. Because their voice is unrecognized, unacknowledged, or ignored, they are prevented from speaking on their own behalf and from participating in society economically, politically, and culturally. They rarely have access to any decision-making process that would lead to meaningful solutions.

People in poverty have their political voice silenced by disenfranchisement. Because their voice is unacknowledged and they lack power, they are not recognized as active contributors to society. Voting laws and regulations (for example, the requirement to produce a personal identification card or a birth certificate in order to vote, and the need to travel miles to a polling station) prevent some people in poverty from voting. People in poverty have been labeled as apathetic or too lazy to vote. The reality is that many of them know that their elected representatives do not care about them or, worse, only use them as an example when talking about benefit fraud or crime. These dynamics prevent their voice from being heard and deny their participation in political life.

## Social Isolation



Isolation caused by the multiple aspects of poverty can take many forms. Some people living in poverty do not have a social

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<sup>1</sup> Gallup activist

<sup>2</sup> J. Ocean, 2018

<sup>3</sup> U.S research team activist

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

network of family or friends they can call on when they need support. Some people may be ostracized by others in their community who perceive them to be lower in socio-economic class. Some people might self-isolate because they fear being found out as being poor if they cannot contribute financially to community events or because they fear casting shame on their entire family. Respectability politics creates divisions between people living poverty. Geographic segregation isolates people in poverty from society at large, limiting the diversity of the social and economic groups they can interact with.

Such isolation can be a double punishment: "The more you need people to count on, the less they are here."<sup>1</sup> Some people in poverty have alienated their family and friends by asking too often for help. They are considered to have character flaws or to be unwilling to provide for themselves, and their friends begin to avoid them. "If you are poor, it is on you."<sup>2</sup> Social isolation also comes from the instability created by the multiple hardships of poverty. "People in poverty also bounce around, going from family relative to family relative. They are evicted, or in shelter, or living in a car. That's not a stable enough [living environment] to build a support network."<sup>3</sup> This creates a vicious cycle of people in need not having anyone to turn to and becoming more deeply in need and further isolated.

Feeling abandoned in a time of need adds to the emotional component of social isolation, the feeling that no one cares. People in poverty feel they are unable to connect with others or to be present in relationships as they would like to be. "People isolated us because of our poverty, and once you are

isolated, you started to self-isolate."<sup>4</sup> "You start to get depressed and then you don't want to be involved with people, so you get even more depressed and more isolated."<sup>5</sup> "Why do we isolate ourselves? I don't know, but it is maybe something that keeps poverty rolling. On the other hand, for some of us, isolation is self-preservation, in order not to lose our sanity, our identity. It is to survive and to not completely lose ourselves. It is part of our coping mechanisms too."<sup>6</sup> For some, this cycle can lead to self-harm, while others might self-medicate with drugs and alcohol to numb the pain.

In some isolated rural areas, families in poverty depend upon one another just to survive. These strong family bonds sometimes serve to further isolate the family members from those outside the family circle. They do not want other people to know their level of hardship because they fear that the entire family might be shunned by the larger community. Instead, they suffer in silence. They fear being shunned because of prejudice in the community. It may be against a smaller unit of their family or an individual family member. People may say "They aren't like us." Even extended family members may shun the family to protect their own social status: "People don't want to bother with 'people like us;' they think they are not like us."<sup>7</sup> This also happens in urban areas, but it has a greater effect in rural areas where geographic isolation demands that people rely on one another more.

Social isolation is also rooted in the low self-esteem associated with the multiple hardships of poverty: people are ashamed, not able to participate, or fear being *found*

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<sup>1</sup> New York activist

<sup>2</sup> New York activist

<sup>3</sup> New York activist

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<sup>4</sup> Gallup activist women's group

<sup>5</sup> Boston activist

<sup>6</sup> U.S. research team activist

<sup>7</sup> Gallup activist women's group

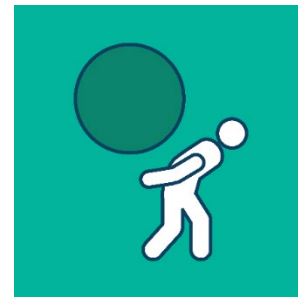
out as poor. This leads to feelings of insignificance and worthlessness. And when they don't have family or friends around, they feel isolated. "We are always, in a way, outsiders — like we don't belong."<sup>1</sup> A U.S. research team activist said, "In poverty, we have to learn some emotional disconnection as a way to protect ourselves from the stress of the situation. As kids, we learned 'Don't feel too much.' If we don't allow ourselves to be connected with our feelings, how can we express them? Isolation takes away our sense of agency."<sup>2</sup> This disconnection has long-term consequences; social isolation can result in short- and long-term physical and mental health challenges.

Social isolation may also occur when people in poverty do not have the means to contribute to social life, the means to belong. "There is a duality between our identity from within and our identity from outside. And there is a disconnect between them. Therefore, the material deprivation comes to confirm the identity from the outside perspective, leading [you] to silence your inner identity"<sup>3</sup> This troubling dynamic increases anxiety because people are torn between satisfying their basic needs and satisfying the imposed expectations of socializing to ensure belonging and eliminate social isolation: "Here in the U.S., who you are is defined by what you have. When you have not much, you are not much. And then, you are not treated like you belong."<sup>4</sup>

The limitations of language make it nearly impossible for some people experiencing poverty to describe their lives: "It is like you are locked into what you live because you can't share it with others. There is a lot of contempt in my head and I don't have the

means in English to make sense of it. And because of the fact that we don't have the words, others can put their words, and impose what they think is our identity on us."<sup>5</sup> This labeling is the start of othering and intensifies social isolation.

## The Struggle



This aspect of poverty describes the motivation of some people facing adversity to strive to grow personally in order to overcome poverty and to experience some peace of mind: "The struggle is to be determined not to give up on what you're striving towards."<sup>6</sup>

This aspect also recognizes the rage that some people feel when they confront the realities of poverty and the negative labels they are forced to endure. This struggle is a way of coping, of self-preservation.

There is a tension between relief at having accomplished something (surviving for another week, another month, and taking pride in that), frustration at not having the strength to confront the systems of poverty any longer, and fear of exposure (suffering in silence): "We try to make sense of our struggle as a learning process and we can be proud of that, despite everything that we

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<sup>1</sup> Gallup activist women's group

<sup>2</sup> U.S. research team activist

<sup>3</sup> S. Ashley, 2018

<sup>4</sup> New York activist

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<sup>5</sup> Gallup activist men's group

<sup>6</sup> New York activist

have been denied."<sup>1</sup> Under the multiple attacks of subjugation, people in poverty are looking for inner balance in their lives.

Some people find inner balance on their own: "...people will try to bring you down, but you still have something inside, that spark."<sup>2</sup> Others rely on their faith to get inner balance: "Spirituality/God is my source, my lifeline, my hope."<sup>3</sup>

About the struggle, activist members of the national research team wrote:

Our coping mechanisms are how we go through what life throws at us; how we get through the rage caused by the poverty and inequity we endure. Complacency is what is expected from people living in poverty — that we are lazy, don't want to work hard, and are content with the circumstances of our life. It has been said of us, 'Some people think money only comes from a mailbox,'<sup>4</sup> meaning we are content to rely on government subsidies as opposed to working. These are the external factors (labeling, social humiliation, stigma, judgment) that are imposed on us, causing shame for some and frustration and anger for others.

We have hope and drive, but change in ourselves and in our lives takes time. The most you can hope for is middle class pride — being able to provide for yourself and your family. And we sacrifice for that: consistently going without and putting others' needs before our own. We do all that for our children. We learn from our struggles, but there is also a struggle for internal balance and peace. We strive to be the best we can, for ourselves and our families. But we

also question why it is the poor who are always expected to adapt and change, but not the system, structures, and regulations that support the continuation of poverty.

We have been told — indeed, we have been raised — to be grateful for what we have. We go through situations, 'I don't know what my next meal is going to be or where it's going to come from ...not sure how I'm going pay my rent this week'<sup>5</sup> and we are grateful for having gone through that, for having survived. We have learned to be grateful to be alive, but there is a rage in that because of our stories and histories. When we are told to be grateful for the poor quality of resources and the limited resources we are allowed to access, we become resentful because we are not allowed to go further. We are forced to accept what cannot change and to find peace in it. 'People who say they are 'grateful for life' is something people say who don't have anything else.'<sup>6</sup>

We do not claim to be victims, but for some there is an undercurrent of rage at the injustices we face; a back-and-forth between positive and negative.

Society likes to describe as *resilient* those people in poverty who have gone through repeated struggles and managed to survive, as opposed to succumbing. Resiliency is a label that is thrown at us to describe that. We don't want to use the word resilience. That is not our vocabulary.

We embrace the identities we give ourselves: mother, father, provider, friend, activist, educator, and others. We develop strength from defining ourselves

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<sup>1</sup> S. Ashley, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Boston activist

<sup>3</sup> Oakland activist

<sup>4</sup> Appalachia activist

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<sup>5</sup> New Orleans activist

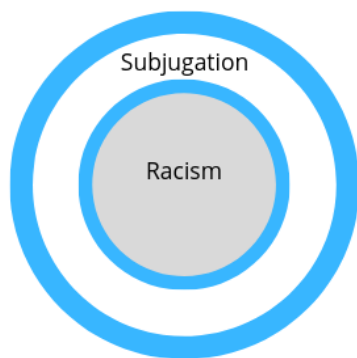
<sup>6</sup> New Orleans activist

and from resisting our life conditions and the labels imposed on us.

## "There's always something." — A Never-Ending Cycle of Crises

For people living in poverty, the need often arises to change focus in order to handle emergencies and to respond to how multiple aspects of poverty intensify one another. For example, lack of adequate health and well-being can have an effect on employment, which can lead to exclusion from access to resources and increased social isolation. In the lives of people in poverty, one crisis follows another in what can seem like a never-ending cycle: "If it's not one thing, it's another. There's always something."<sup>1</sup> This could provoke a sense of unfairness or misfortune when, in fact, there is an absence of security that could help people recover. The interdependence of the aspects of poverty creates a constant cycle of crises that needs to be approached comprehensively if long-term solutions are to be found.

## Subjugation and Racism



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<sup>1</sup> M. Broxton, 2018

Racism and its effect on poverty was cited in all but one of the peer-group meetings<sup>2</sup> conducted during this research, and is named as one of the aggravators of poverty in this report. Because of the extent to which racism has been entwined in the social and structural fabric of America, and even before this nation's founding, it has become almost a given for some people, while others insist we must look past it because the discussion makes them uncomfortable. As one practitioner stated, "Because of the inherent and embedded reality of racism in the fabric of our society/world it maybe gets lost along the way because it just became tacitly understood. But it still needs to be named and identified. I think that happens a lot, where people are like, 'Oh, obviously racism,' but no one really emphasizes it enough."<sup>3</sup> For that reason, we need to discuss it independently of the aggravators to understand why it makes the consequences of poverty much greater for some than for others.

Racism in America is rooted in subjugation. Throughout American history, the social structure has favored patriarchy and leaned towards white supremacist dominance, with a large part of America's wealth being built on the enslavement of Africans and the genocide of Native Americans.

In the early 1700s, "deliberately and strategically," as Michelle Alexander states, "the planter class extended special privileges to poor whites in an effort to drive a wedge between them and black slaves."<sup>4</sup> In what could be considered the birth of white privilege, "white servants were allowed to police slave patrols and militias, and barriers

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<sup>2</sup> Twenty-two of the twenty-three peer-group meetings conducted mentioned race or racism.

<sup>3</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, M., *The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2010, p.25

were created so that free labor would not be placed in competition with slave labor. Poor whites suddenly had a direct, personal stake in the existence of a race-based system of slavery. Their own plight had not improved by much, but at least they were not slaves."<sup>1</sup> This purposeful dividing of people at the very bottom of the socio-economic scale ensured exploitation for the sake of creating wealth and at the same time maintained control over a large part of the population. This is the basis of the political rhetoric that, even today, pits one community against the other and keeps them divided. "It gets embedded in institutions, but I think that a lot of the ways in which institutions work, in America, start with some kind of oppression and its usually based on race because that was one of the main justifications for the setup of the U.S. being what it was."<sup>2</sup>

For people of color living in poverty, their being as well as their bodies have been considered discordant in regard to American norms, culture, and ideals. African Americans were considered property and classified as three-fifths of a human being for the purpose of the states' political representation in Congress. After the Civil War, sharecropping and the convict lease system were used to keep African Americans in indentured servitude. Jim Crow laws and segregation prevented African Americans from participating in the pursuit of happiness,<sup>3</sup> while lynching was used to terrorize them and keep them in their place. Redlining<sup>4</sup> in the 1950s and '60s created forced communities and prevented African Americans from accumulating wealth from home ownership that could be handed down to their heirs. The 1927

Supreme Court ruling of *Buck v. Bell*<sup>5</sup> set a precedent for the hidden and, in some instances, forced sterilization of African American women receiving public subsidies throughout the South (and some Eastern states) up until the 1970s. Later referred to as a *Mississippi appendectomy*,<sup>6</sup> this misogynoir practice was implemented by state agencies to prevent women in poverty from having children, therefore lowering the cost of the welfare rolls.<sup>7</sup> Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*<sup>8</sup> cited the "ghetto culture" of African Americans as the reason for their poverty, reinforcing the notion that their poverty was of their own doing rather than the result of generations of subjugation and institutional racism. The broken windows theory<sup>9</sup> led to a justice system that targets and convicts people of color, and supports the profiteering bail-bond system and the prison-industrial complex that disproportionately separates

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2018

<sup>3</sup> The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, UShistory.org, <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/redlining>

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<sup>5</sup> "Buck v. Bell," Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/274/200>

<sup>6</sup> Hutchinson, C. "Serializing the Sick, Poor to Cut Welfare Costs: North Carolina's History of Eugenics. abcnews. April 4, 2011. <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/WomensHealth/sterilizing-sick-poor-cut-welfare-costs-north-carolinas/story?id=14093458>

<sup>7</sup> Hutchinson, C. "Serializing the Sick, Poor to Cut Welfare Costs: North Carolina's History of Eugenics. abcnews. April 4, 2011. <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/WomensHealth/sterilizing-sick-poor-cut-welfare-costs-north-carolinas/story?id=14093458>

<sup>8</sup> Moynihan, Daniel P., United States Department of Labor. 1913-Office of Policy Planning and Research. *The Negro Family, The case for national action*. Pp. 78[Washington], 1965

<sup>9</sup> McKee, Adam J., "Broken windows theory. Academic Theory." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/broken-windows-theory>



families of color through the imprisonment of over one million African American men.<sup>1</sup>

Racism in the United States is not limited to African Americans. Throughout history other groups have been subjugated and ostracized due to race. "I'm from the East Coast. But I always have to keep in mind the West Coast and Southwest; for those areas, racism has hit indigenous populations and Mexican populations and in some places Japanese and Chinese. Depending on where one is geographically in the U.S., racism impacts different communities in the same way."<sup>2</sup>

Encroachment began on Native lands with the first Europeans who arrived in what would later become the United States. Declaring Native American populations to be *savages* and *heathens* who misused the land — meaning for subsistence as opposed to profit — white settlers justified seizing Native American land. Manifest Destiny<sup>3</sup> and broken treaties led to the forced removal of Native Americans from their tribal lands to reservations. The estimated four thousand Cherokee who died from exposure, hunger, and disease during the Trail of Tears<sup>4</sup> were a fraction of the forty-six thousand Native Americans removed from their homeland by the Jackson administration.<sup>5</sup> During the late nineteenth and up to the mid-twentieth century, the boarding school system

removed Native American children from their family, placed them in boarding schools, and stripped them of their culture and language with the goal of



Americanizing them. "In boarding schools English was taught, you were not allowed to speak your own language under fear of punishment... no one was allowed to speak Navajo."<sup>6</sup>

In a country built by successive waves of immigrants, several million Americans take pride in offering the story of a relative who immigrated to America with limited funds and was able to achieve the American Dream. But for some, the romanticizing of a welcoming openness only masks nativism. "On the Statue of Liberty it says, 'Give me your tired, your poor,' but you can't see the added part at the bottom that says: only if they look like us, only if they sound like

<sup>1</sup> NAACP, 2018. "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet" <http://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

<sup>2</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2018

<sup>3</sup> The belief that Western expansion of the U.S. was ordained by God. Scott, Donald M. "The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny." Divining America, TeacherServe©. National Humanities Center. September 3, 2018.

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/mandestiny.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Indian Removal." PBS.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2959.html>

<sup>5</sup> "Indian Removal." PBS.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2959.html>

<sup>6</sup> Activist, Gallup men's group, 2017

us."<sup>1</sup> The Naturalization Act of 1790 restricted citizenship to "any alien, being a free white person."<sup>2</sup> This othering of people who do not look "American" (read *white*) allows nativism to flourish, supports the thinking behind Arizona SB 1070<sup>3</sup> — the "papers please" law — and separates children and parents seeking asylum at the southern U.S. border. "I work with a lot of asylum seekers and every week there's some new thing that impacts whether or not they'll be able to stay here or what they have to do; like what extra fifteen steps they have to take to try to persuade the country that they belong here or that they deserve to be here."<sup>4</sup> Racial discrimination also has a direct impact on predicting who may experience poverty, and it aggravates the level of poverty they experience. "I'm a third-class citizen in a country that my family has been in since before there was a country."<sup>5</sup>

**“In boarding schools  
English was taught,  
you were not allowed  
to speak your own  
language ... no one  
was allowed to speak  
Navajo.”**

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<sup>1</sup> M. Wallen, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Imai, S. "Naturalization Act of 1790"  
[http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Naturalization\\_Act\\_of\\_1790/](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Naturalization_Act_of_1790/)

<sup>3</sup>

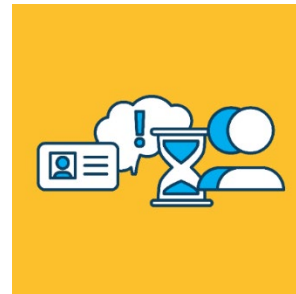
<https://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/sb1070s.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Activist, New Orleans, 2018

## The Aggravators that Make the Experience of Poverty Worse:

### Time, Racism, Social Identity, and the Accumulation of Aspects



In determining the aspects of poverty, we detected elements that aggravate the experience of poverty — by reinforcing the power of subjugation and intensifying the weight of all the aspects — and elements that are beyond people's control but have a constant effect on their experience of poverty. Aggravators and constants reinforce the power of subjugation and increase the impact of the other aspects. These factors are not related to people's capacities, but result from the way subjugation operates at the cultural and institutional levels that shape policies.

### Time

When discussing the effect of time on the dimensions of poverty, we realized that long and short term could mean very different time frames depending on people's daily lives. Whereas people not experiencing poverty may define short term as a couple of months and long term as five to ten years,

some people in poverty have stated they couldn't plan long term because they were constantly dealing with the immediacy of surviving the *now*. Short term for them might be a day and long term would be making it to the end of the month. "You think, if I can just make it to the end of the week everything will be okay."<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of this discussion was our realization that the time of people living in poverty is not considered to be as valuable as that of people not living in poverty; it is considered expendable. "What you choose to do with your day shows the options you have; and if you have (or not) the power to make decisions about these choices."<sup>2</sup> Many people assume that people living in poverty have an abundance of time: you're poor so you must not be working, therefore you have more time to wait for services or to return repeatedly with documents when applying for subsidies. In contrast, when people in poverty are in dire need of a resource, time is limited: for example, too little time is given to become self-sustainable when receiving help, time limits are imposed in shelters, and there is rarely enough time to find other housing if being evicted.

When considering generational poverty, we determined that brief periods of security do not outweigh the deep impacts of a lifetime of barely subsisting: "There have been times when I've had a little more and felt like I could finally breathe, but that doesn't stop the clock and mean that poverty ended for me and I'm out of it; and the poverty clock started again when those times ended. Since my great grandfather came here as an immigrant, to my grandfather, to my mother, to me and my family, poverty has been consistent across generations. No one, no matter how hard they worked or tried, was able to make it into the middle class and stay

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<sup>1</sup> M. Broxton, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Academic, Boston, 2017

there. They all struggled just to keep their head above water and survive."<sup>3</sup>

The impact of poverty differs depending on the amount of time spent in poverty: the more time spent in poverty, the more the accumulation of aspects is likely to happen. A lifetime spent in poverty can cause physical and mental health trauma leading to toxic stress.<sup>4</sup> "I raised three sons and when I sent them to school, sometimes I didn't know if they'd come home later. It's very stressful. We need to be at peace, our homes and schools. You put on the television and everything is violence. How do you go to sleep at night? How do you feel peace at all? It's prevalent to me personally, in my community, and globally."<sup>5</sup> The physical and mental health issues caused by poverty can continue throughout a lifetime — even if a person is able to leave poverty — and have the greatest effect of all on time: a shorter lifespan. "When you are in poverty, you die sooner."<sup>6</sup>

## Racism

Racism is embedded in the fabric of our society. Some Americans believe that all people of color are poor, and all poor people are people of color. That belief stems from the fact that racism influences policies, practices, and programs, privileging some groups over others. "The same GI bill that allowed a lot of the suburbs to be built along

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<sup>3</sup> M. Broxton, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Chilton, Mariana and Rabinowich, Jenny (2012) "Toxic Stress and Child Hunger Over the Life Course: Three Case Studies," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 3. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk/vol3/iss1/3>

<sup>5</sup> Activist, Boston, 2017

<sup>6</sup> Activist, New Orleans, 2017

with federal subsidies was not given to black people. We can't talk about generational poverty without talking about the people who created the policies that created generational poverty. Discriminatory policies; it wasn't just bad policies, it was discriminatory policies. It's been discriminatory policies that literally keep people in poverty."<sup>1</sup> Racism is also evident in the form of daily microaggressions that can be internalized by some people and force them to exhibit controlled personal behavior. "When I go into a store with my wife I stay at the front, lean against the wall, and make sure I keep my hands visible. If I don't, I know I'll be followed around the store because it's happened before."<sup>2</sup>

## Accumulation of Aspects

The accumulation of the aspects of poverty can result in a lifetime of poverty. The stress and trauma from consistently dealing with the hardship of multiple aspects of poverty often lead to physical and mental health problems. "I have a lot of problems. Right now the gas and electric are cut off."<sup>3</sup> "Some of the problems that people may have may be solvable, but when there are so many issues, it is hard to use your problem-solving skills."<sup>4</sup>

## Social Identity

Social identity engages our beliefs, values, and norms in a complex, dynamic relationship that creates socially imposed

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<sup>1</sup> Practitioner, New Orleans, 2017

<sup>2</sup> S. Ashley, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Academic, Boston, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Academic, Boston, 2017

labels based on social and cultural constructs. In the United States, who you are is based on social regard and status. "Identity is a fundamentally social thing... I'm only white because someone else isn't, only a woman because someone else isn't. It's almost like identity is assigned by someone else, not self-assigned."<sup>5</sup> People in poverty face a dual experience with identity: how society identifies them (static), and how they identify themselves (dynamic; evolving with life experiences) — the *how I see me* vs. *how you see me*. "Being white and female from a rural area, we're viewed as uneducated; our accent is an embarrassment for many, but I'm very proud of it."<sup>6</sup>

Like racism, social identity affects policies, practices, and programs that privilege some groups over others because it has the ability to deprive people in poverty of any power and therefore of control over their own lives. The more marginalized social identities that can be placed on a person in poverty, the less power they have, resulting in a deeper experience of poverty. For example, an African American LGBT woman will have a much different experience of poverty than a white heterosexual man. But people resist being labeled: "In this country I am seen as a multi-racial gay man and an immigrant, so when people see me, they see those things. Those are not my issues; those are other people's issues."<sup>7</sup>

Some people in poverty are able to hold on to their personal identity in spite of the multiple identities society places on them: "I'm really clear of what I'm seen as through other people's eyes. I grew up in poverty, but it doesn't define me."<sup>8</sup> "I do not personally identify with poverty. I do identify with the fact that it exists, and it has

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<sup>5</sup> Academic, Boston, 2017

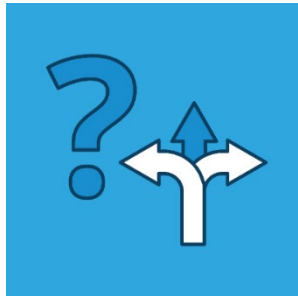
<sup>6</sup> Practitioner, Appalachia (southwest, VA.) 2017

<sup>7</sup> M. Wallen, 2018

<sup>8</sup> Activist, New Orleans, 2018

influenced the person that I have become. But thank God it did not, and does not, define who I am. I do, and I have had less. I have done without, but I've had so much more — not monetary — throughout my life span. But I don't own poverty."<sup>1</sup>

## The Constants Present in Each Aspect of Poverty: Uncertainty and Hard Choices



### Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a daily factor and driving force in the experience of poverty. It has been described as: "not knowing how your day will go when you wake up in the morning, knowing that any hiccup in your day will be bigger for someone in poverty than for someone not in poverty."<sup>2</sup> Uncertainty is a result of the lack of power that comes from subjugation. For people experiencing poverty, uncertainty places them at the mercy of other people and of situations beyond their control — zero-hour work for example, a no-fault eviction, or an unexpected emergency can send people into a tailspin they are unable to recover from. People in poverty develop strategies to

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<sup>1</sup> Activist, Boston, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Academic, Boston, 2017

overcome uncertainty: "When you live in poverty everybody is your friend. You need to be friendly to everyone because you need help for everything. If homeless, you need laundry done, a place to stay; you go to a friend's house, you need food; you need money to pay bills when out of work; when you need guidance, you need free help. You need friends for everything."<sup>3</sup>

### Hard Choices

Some people believe that poverty is the result of poor choices. The reality is that the only choices available to people living in poverty are ones that will have negative results: "Our choices are only ever dire; it feels like we have no choices at all."<sup>4</sup>

In poverty there is often no way to recover from a hard choice, and the consequences are always extreme, pushing people further and further down. For example, for parents living in poverty forced to choose between buying food or buying a winter coat for their child, both choices can be seen as neglect, and the result could be removal of the child from the home. Other examples given in peer groups concerned workplace sexual harassment not being reported for fear of losing a job,<sup>5</sup> or help not being sought for fear of bringing shame to an entire family and being shunned by a community.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Activist, NYC, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Activist, Gallup men's group, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Academic, national Merging Knowledge meeting, NYC, 2018

<sup>6</sup> Practitioner, Appalachia, 2017

## Conclusion: The American Myth and the Reality of Poverty

Living in poverty in a wealthy country like the United States of America, where personal industry and moral uprightness are seen as leading to prosperity, is an extremely hard experience. To understand the added weight our cultural beliefs place on people experiencing poverty, it is essential to acknowledge the myths supporting them and also to know who defines what it means to be *American* and what voices are left out. "It's about belonging to the right side of society. You need to be a part of society that's being seen; if you're not seen, you become fringe population."<sup>1</sup>

America takes pride in describing itself as a land of opportunities where anyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and achieve upward mobility. People are judged by the extent to which they have achieved the American Dream based on their material possessions and the ability to provide a better life for their children. These cultural assumptions foster a sense of failure and inadequacy for the more than 40 million<sup>2</sup> Americans who live in poverty and are striving to better their families' lives without seeing results, most often for reasons out of their control.<sup>3</sup> "There's a class of people

who continue to enslave others; it's a kind of slavery. The slaves are still working for that slave wage. Why is there a minimum wage but not a livable wage?"<sup>4</sup>

As Philip Alston stated after his official visit to the United States as a UN Special Rapporteur: "What I've seen in the U.S. is the dominance of twin narratives which are that the rich are enterprising, altruistic, hardworking, dedicated. The poor are losers, scammers; people trying to profit from the system."<sup>5</sup> The type of attitude Alston describes fuels the idea of the *deserving/good poor*, who live in poverty due to no fault of their own; and the *undeserving/bad poor*, who live in poverty because of their irresponsible behavior, lack of morals, or character flaws: "The belief is that people aren't poor in the U.S., but there's also the idea of the 'Welfare Queen,' and if you're poor, you don't deserve the help you get."<sup>6</sup>

The weight of negative social regard, stemming from people's need to differentiate others by labeling them, has created the social dynamic of respectability politics.

Some policy makers rely on this social regard to justify cutting social and safety-net services for people undergoing hardship. People in poverty — judged to have moral failings, unacceptable behavior, and low social worth — have been infantilized by systems, institutions, and the public based on the belief that others know what is best for them. "Those making decisions not to solve poverty are not the poor. Poverty is an exclusion from the safety system to the point

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<sup>1</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2017

<sup>2</sup> "Poverty and Income in the United States:2016." United States Census Bureau, September 12, 2017. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2017/demo/p60-259.html>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabah-ghezali/what-american-dream-why-t\\_b\\_694612.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabah-ghezali/what-american-dream-why-t_b_694612.html). Also, Adelman, R.M., Wagmiller, R.L. "Childhood and Intergenerational Poverty; the Long Term Consequences of Growing Up Poor." November 2009. National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia

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University, [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_909.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_909.html)

<sup>4</sup> Activist, NYC, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Alston, P., press conference, Friday, December 15, 2017, Washington D.C. <https://www.facebook.com/AlstonUNSR/videos/533327963714410/>

<sup>6</sup> Activist, Boston, 2017

where the person is threatened by the system that was created to ensure safety."<sup>1</sup> "They've been told their whole life that they aren't enough and need to be more and it's really the systems that aren't enough and need to be more."<sup>2</sup>

In the work of identifying the aspects of poverty presented in this report, we saw that poverty results from a structural process. When you live in poverty, in the words of one activist, "You are always under somebody's thumb."<sup>3</sup> Rather than having control over their own lives, people find themselves trapped. "People make you feel shame over something that you have no control over."<sup>4</sup> This, too, ties in with the American aspiration to succeed materially and financially: it provides a standard by which to judge people for whom success is beyond reach. "Poverty is not caused by us. Poverty is given to us; we were placed in poverty."<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the process of subjugation, people in poverty are forced to live in disadvantaged areas where they lack access to basic resources, they suffer ill health, they struggle against work- and employment-related hardships, they have their voice silenced or ignored, they live in exclusion and isolation, and they endure stigma and shame. As these aspects of poverty accumulate and aggravate one another, life becomes a struggle — not just a struggle to make ends meet, but a struggle against feelings of anger and shame as well as a struggle to resist and to overcome the injustice of poverty. We have seen that poverty is the result of cultural and social forces interacting; it is not just an accident in

a person's life or in a family's circumstances.

How can we go forward to end poverty in the United States? The aspects of poverty identified in this report provide a basis for developing innovative approaches. This is not to say that we should abandon existing efforts to find solutions, but rather that these aspects invite us to be more creative in what we do. There is a growing awareness in the United States of the importance of racial and ethnic diversity, and this gives us great hope although there is still much work to be done in that area. Because racism and poverty are deeply connected in this country, we need to make sure that as we work to build a more inclusive future we address both issues coherently and simultaneously.

We hope the description of our methodology can serve as a reference for best practices in addressing poverty. In order to overcome poverty, we need a comprehensive approach, conceived and designed with people living in poverty. People who work to end poverty need to create spaces like those we used to conduct this research, where people in poverty can speak for themselves, in dialogue with others.

Finally, our approach demonstrates that if practitioners, policy makers, and academics want to build real partnerships with people living in poverty, they will find dynamic partners who are ready to be part of building a more just society. Poverty is not inevitable. To overcome it, we must all work together.

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<sup>1</sup> Activist, Boston, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Practitioner, NYC, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Activist, Boston

<sup>4</sup> Activist, Boston, 2017

<sup>5</sup> New York activist

## Appendix I:

### How We Conducted This Research

#### 1. The national research team

In December 2016, to launch the research, academics, practitioners, and people living in poverty from New York City; Boston; Gallup, NM; New Orleans; Oakland, CA; and Trenton, NJ, were invited to attend a two-day national training session on the Merging Knowledge approach.

In January 2017, the national research team (NRT) coordinators conducted the first Skype team meeting (with participants in different places connected in a video conference call online) to allow members to learn how to work together as a team. Some difficult conversations took place at this meeting. One person living in poverty wanted to ensure that the involvement of activists in the project would not be as *guinea pigs*, giving their opinion but not having their input count. Another person questioned the racial makeup of the team and the power dynamic it could create. At this meeting, it was agreed to use the term *activist* for people who live in poverty, consistent with the principle that one group of people should not be labeled or known only by the struggles they face, while other groups are known by their profession. It was also decided that all decisions would be made with all members of the team and that, in some instances, the knowledge of activists would take precedence over other types of knowledge.

Being conscious of the racial and gender balance, as well as the power dynamic, within the NRT was a constant concern for all the team members.

The research team was composed of two African American men, one African American woman, one Native American man, three Caucasian women, one Latina immigrant woman, one Caucasian immigrant man, and one Trinidadian/Indian immigrant man. Of them, six members of the team experienced poverty and two identify as LGBTQ. A research assistant was also added to the team but was not able to continue with the work. The Oakland practitioner peer group spoke for all, saying, "We are diverse, but we are not divided."

Because of health reasons and life circumstances, the two African American men left the NRT in October and November of 2017. The loss of their presence and knowledge has been felt greatly within the team, and we are sure that, had they been able to continue, our results would have reflected their African American male perspective.

#### 2. The peer groups in the locations

The first NRT meeting was followed by a national webinar to introduce the goals of the project to location teams. Between January and February 2017, the NRT determined the activities to be used to best determine, define, and rank the aspects of poverty. The NRT team agreed that poverty was a lived experience and that specific aspects of life could relate to poverty and determine the level of poverty a person experiences. For this reason, it was determined that during the first activity we would ask "What do you like/not like about your life?" This allows participants to look past the stereotypes, stigma, and tropes associated with poverty; and, for the people living in poverty, to consider poverty as a human experience. As stated by a Boston academic peer-group participant, "For me, when I thought about those



dimensions, I thought the person (and not the household) was the unit of analysis. [...] So much more came out about society, politics, etc., by taking the person as a unit of analysis."

Between February and March 2017, the NRT revised the peer group facilitation guides several times (sometimes changing as little as one word) to ensure full comprehension by peer-group participants and ease of facilitation for location teams. A consent form was developed for peer-group participants with the same aim as the facilitation guides while also considering the ethical standards of the research. During the same time period, the coordinators conducted webinars on the facilitation guides, the consent form, and ethics training for location teams and the NRT. In February 2017, people in western Virginia, in the Appalachian mountains, agreed to contribute to this work.

In April, the NRT conducted two peer-group meetings within the NRT (one with activists and one with academics) to test the facilitation guides during a three-day in-person NRT meeting in New York City. At the same time, two pilot peer groups (one with practitioners and one with academics) were launched in New York City, also to test the facilitation guides. It was realized at this time that Trenton, NJ, would not be able to participate as a MAP location. As with the loss of the African American male members of the NRT, we were saddened by the loss of Trenton's participation and wealth of knowledge.

In May 2017, two activist peer groups were conducted in Gallup, NM: one all male, one all-female, allowing participants to feel more comfortable speaking freely about their experiences. An academic peer-group meeting was conducted in Boston. In June, an academic peer-group meeting was conducted among NGO representatives at the UN. At the same time, an activist peer-group meeting was conducted in Boston; and in July a NRT coordinator traveled to New Orleans, LA, to conduct a four-day facilitation guide training for the facilitators there in support of the start of their activist peer group. In August, a second activist peer-group meeting was conducted in Boston. In September 2017, an NRT coordinator and an NRT academic traveled to Appalachia (Dickinson County, southwest Virginia) to facilitate an intensive two-day peer-group and local Merging Knowledge session with activists and practitioners. At the same time, practitioner, academic, and activist peer groups were starting up in Oakland, CA, and an activist peer-group meeting was being conducted in New York City. In October 2017, an NRT coordinator and an ATD national director traveled to Oakland, CA, to assist in a local merging of activist, academic, and practitioner peer groups. A practitioner peer-group meeting was being conducted in New Orleans, LA, at this time.

At the end of October 2017, the U.S. NRT conducted a two-day in-person Merging Knowledge session in Boston to examine twelve peer-group reports (three academic, six activist, three practitioner). After reviewing the reports from both rural and urban U.S. locations, the NRT noticed similarities in the aspects, characteristics, and experiences of the participants based on the knowledge they shared. It was determined to combine this knowledge into one list of preliminary dimensions<sup>1</sup>, while also making note of aspects<sup>2</sup> specific to each region. The result was a U.S. preliminary report identifying eight aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> This decision was supported by the experience of two of the NRT male activists at the April 2017 in-person NRT meeting where the team conducted two peer-group meetings amongst themselves. The members, an African American man and lifelong NYC resident, and a Native American man and Gallup, NM, lifelong resident, were both amazed by the similarities in their life experiences and their experience of poverty, even though one lived in an extremely rural location and the other lived in an extremely urban location.

<sup>2</sup> This was also done for the NRT merging in May 2018.

poverty (in no specific order): dehumanization, basic needs, systematic violence, human connectivity, suffering in silence, powerlessness, fruit of life, holistic health.

Between January and May 2018, the NRT conducted weekly Skype team meetings to review and compare two peer-group reports in preparation for the May NRT Merging Knowledge session. Between April and May 2018, three activist peer groups (one of which was conducted solely in Chinese), one practitioner, and one academic UN peer group contributed.

### 3. Merging Knowledge

In May 2018, the U.S. NRT conducted a four-day Merging Knowledge session to reexamine the previous twelve peer-group reports along with an additional ten reports for a total of twenty-two (eleven activist, seven academic, four practitioner).

At the session, the NRT first separated into like peer groups — activist, academic, and practitioner — to examine respective reports, and then regrouped to merge the collective knowledge. The NRT noticed patterns, or themes, in the clusters of aspects and characteristics resulting from the merged knowledge. This led the NRT to realize that more than one aspect or characteristic could be named in each dimension because of the interconnected nature of poverty, and that these connections could be important. To illustrate this, the NRT developed a series of gears (the dimension) with interlocking spokes (the aspects/characteristics).



The NRT also realized that there are *constants*, or factors that a person has no control over and are present in each dimension but may not constitute a dimension on their own and that affect the depth of poverty a person experiences: uncertainty, leading to hard choices and *Catch-22* situations; time, gender, LGBTQ identity, ethnicity, immigration status, and how society sees you as opposed to how you see yourself. The NRT recognized that an accumulation of constants, along with an accumulation of dimensions, intensifies

the experience of poverty. This allowed the team to develop the framework to define and name the dimensions and develop a program of work for the national seminar<sup>1</sup>.

The definitions for three dimensions were considered and developed at this meeting. The following week three more were developed during an all-day NRT Skype meeting, and the remaining three were defined the same way the next week, for a total of nine dimensions.

Between April 2017 and May 2018, a total of 23<sup>2</sup> peer-group meetings were conducted in six locations across the United States: ten in New York City, three in Oakland, CA., three in Boston, two in Appalachia (Dickinson County, VA.), two in New Orleans, two in Gallup, NM., and two within the U.S. national research team. The results presented here include the processes developed by the NRT and implemented by the NRT and U.S. location teams, data developed from peer groups, and the final findings from a national Merging Knowledge seminar where 40 participants, including delegates from each location peer group, gathered in New York City in June 2018.



National Merging Knowledge meeting, June 2018, NYC

#### 4. Support offered to location teams

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for U.S. national peer-group participants program.

<sup>2</sup> Along with the activist peer-group meeting conducted with home health aides, a peer-group meeting was also conducted with their clients as part of the agreement to conduct the meeting at the Tompkins Park Senior Center. The data from this report was not taken into account in the NRT or national Merging Knowledge session because all the participants were in their late 60s to mid-70s; past the working-age adult (18-65) module the U.S. team selected. The report was saved for future reference or comparison for another NRT who may conduct peer-group meetings with the elderly.

Because of the geographical distances in the United States, facilitation teams were formed in each of the six U.S. locations to allow for peer-group meetings to be conducted in the East and West coasts, the South, and in rural Appalachia and New Mexico. In all locations, an NRT coordinator, NRT member, or ATD volunteer or board member joined the location team and took part in facilitating the peer groups.

Location teams:	
NYC:	NRT coordinator, NRT activist, three ATD volunteer corps members
Boston:	NRT coordinator, NRT activist, ATD volunteer corps member
New Orleans:	ATD volunteer corps member, ATD ally
Appalachia:	Two ATD volunteer corps members
Oakland:	Two staff members of St. Mary's Senior Center, one member of St. Mary's, one ATD board member
New Mexico:	One NRT activist, three ATD volunteer corps members

In January 2017 the NRT coordinators began conducting monthly webinars for the location teams. Two webinars on the same topic were conducted in the same week to ensure that all participants could fit them into their schedules.

An ethics training webinar was conducted with the NRT and location teams to allow them to be familiar with and fully understand the ethical standards involved in this type of research. A webinar explaining the consent form was conducted along with a webinar explaining the facilitation guides to be used in conducting a peer-group meeting to determine, define, and rank the dimensions of poverty, and to write a peer-group report.

NRT coordinators conducted Skype meetings with location teams (or in-person meetings when location permitted) to discuss the process of outreach to possible participants and review the facilitation guides used in each of the four peer-group meetings. They also reviewed the materials and documents needed to conduct a peer-group meeting with each location team, and in some instances, ordered the supplies needed and had them delivered to the locations. Coordinators suggested that the location team conduct a mock peer-group meeting among themselves prior to conducting one with participants to better understand the process and become more comfortable with facilitation. Prior to a peer group starting up, coordinators conducted a Skype or in-person meeting with location teams or facilitators to offer encouragement and answer any last questions or concerns. At the half way point — between peer-group meeting two (photo speak: defining) and peer-group meeting three (pond ranking) — coordinators conducted a meeting with location teams or facilitators to answer any questions or concerns.

### **5. At-a-distance NRT meetings**

Skype and GoToMeeting have been valuable tools used by the U.S. NRT to bridge the geographical distances separating team members. With members from New York City, Boston, and Gallup, it was impossible to conduct frequent in-person meetings due to distance and cost of travel. For that reason the online platforms were used to conduct monthly team meetings. When possible, team members in New York City and Boston met together in their respective locations to call in, while one member from Gallup joined the call. Meetings lasted from two hours to two and a half hours.

When necessary, bi-monthly or weekly at-a-distance Skype or GoToMeeting NRT meetings were conducted. For example, prior to the April and October 2017 in-person team meetings, two bi-monthly meetings were held to design the programs for these meetings to ensure the best use of time spent together.

Starting in January 2018, weekly at-a-distance Skype NRT meetings were conducted to review and compare two peer-group reports together in preparation for the May NRT merging. Following the May NRT Merging Knowledge session, three weekly at-a-distance full-day NRT meeting were conducted to finalize the dimension definitions; with one NRT member joining the call from Nicaragua (where she was visiting family).

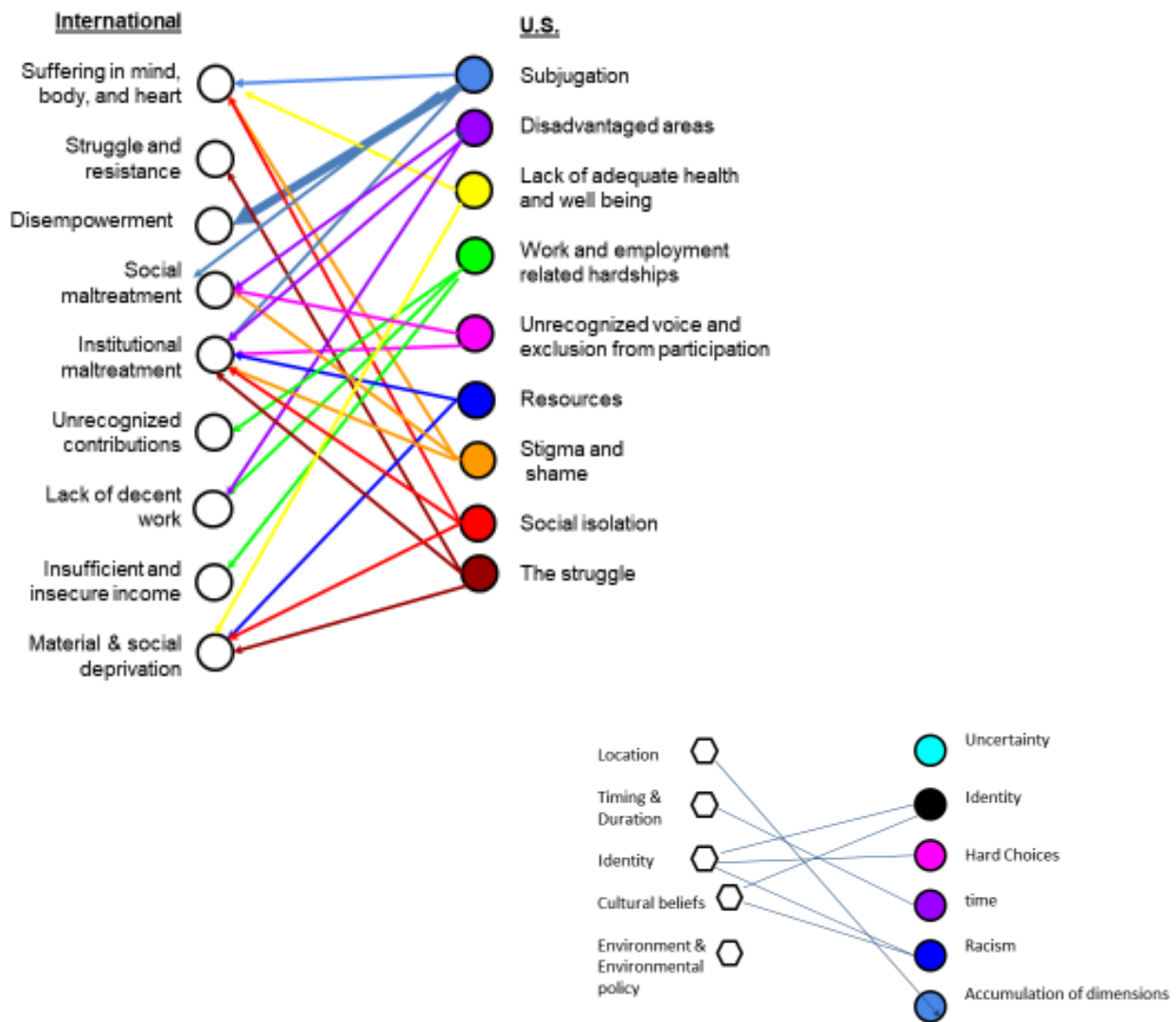
Online calls were also used to reach out to individual NRT members and location teams to offer encouragement and support when needed.

## Appendix II:

### Connections between United States Aspects of Poverty and the International Dimensions

In September 2018 four members of the national research team traveled to France to join members from other national teams at an international seminar. At this time, the dimensions from each country were merged into one international list using the Merging Knowledge methodology.

The charts below illustrate how the U.S. aspects, constants, and aggravators fed into the creation of the international dimensions and modifiers.







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For readers who wish to explore this research in greater depth, a more comprehensive account is available online at [map.4thworldmovement.org](http://map.4thworldmovement.org).



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