**UNDERSTANDING POVERTY**

**EXPANDED CONTENT** – at Understanding Poverty link

One of the principles of Catholic Social Justice is care for the poor and vulnerable. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, we recall Jesus’ admonishment, “as you did to one of the least of these my brothers, you did to me”

Most CCS programs bring chapters face to face with the culture of poverty. **Cultural awareness (link to Cultural Awareness content)** is crucial to successful programs

**A Lack of Resources**

The term under-resourced has come to replace poor or underprivileged because it reflects the actual root causes of living in poverty: success is hard to have if you are hungry, if there is no constant role model in your life, if your education was of poor quality and you fell into the digital divide (the term given to the lack of access to technology that has left many people behind academically and in job-skills).

And who develops ambition when they lack control over their lives, and they have no hope. Control and hope are resources, too.

Resources are far more than money and possessions. Consider these resources:

* Financial – having money to purchase goods and services
* Emotional – being able to respond to negative situations without self-destructive behavior.
* Mental/Intellectual – having the education, abilities and acquired skills to deal with daily life. Unaddressed mental health issues also inhibit success.
* Physical – having physical health, nutrition, mobility
* Positive Relationships/Role Models – having access to adults who nurture, who have succeeded, who make good choices.
* Knowing the hidden rules – knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group. Being able to move into a different environment such as work or social group.
* Coping Strategies – Being able to engage in procedural self-talk, to translate issues from the personal to general.

(*Bridges Out of Poverty* 2001)

**The Brain and Poverty**

There are many studies that point to the damage to children’s brain development caused by the stresses of poverty, poor nutrition, unstable childcare and poor educational opportunities.

The human brain can be sectioned by function. The lobe at the very front, right behind the forehead, is the pre-frontal cortex. It handles problem-solving, goal setting, and task execution. And it works with the limbic system, which is connected and sits closer to the center of the brain. The limbic system processes emotions and triggers emotional responses, in part because of its storage of long-term memory.

When a person lives in poverty, a growing body of research suggests the limbic system is constantly sending fear and stress messages to the prefrontal cortex, which overloads its ability to solve problems, set goals, and complete tasks in the most efficient ways.

This happens to everyone at some point, regardless of social class. The overload can be prompted by any number of things, including an overly stressful day at work or a family emergency. People in poverty, however, have the added burden of ever-present stress.

They are constantly struggling to make ends meet and often bracing themselves against class bias that adds extra strain or even trauma to their daily lives.

And the science is clear—when brain capacity is used up on these worries and fears, there simply isn’t as much bandwidth for other things.

So, the part of the brain most affected by the ravages of poverty controls decision making, understanding right from wrong, future planning, problem solving, organizational skills… do you see how that can impact the future of these children? Or why some adults behave the way they do? People in poverty tend to get stuck in vicious cycles where stress leads to bad decision-making, compounding other problems and reinforcing the idea that they can’t improve their own lives.

In addition to brain development, a 2019 Harvard points to a handful of key indicators, including exposure to high levels of lead, violence, and incarceration as key predictors of children’s later success. The study found that the greater the extent to which poor black male children were exposed to harsh environments, the higher their chances of being incarcerated in adulthood and the lower their adult incomes, measured in their 30s. A similar income pattern also emerged for white children. The lived experience of growing up in a poor in a harsh environment, gets into the minds and bodies of children.” This study parallels the ACE studies that trach **Adverse Childhood Experiences** (link to ACE information) as detrimental to successful adulthoods.

**Kinds of Poverty**

There are different kinds of poverty: Situational and Generational. People are in Situational Poverty because of a catastrophic event such as a serious accident, divorce, chronic illness, or sudden job loss. Their situation may be temporary and despite their dire economic circumstances, they most likely have some resources, family support and job skills to get them through. They also have the experience of success to build on.

Generational Poverty is defined as having been in poverty for at least 2 generations. It is often characterized by chaotic family structures, a matriarchal family, and living in a survival orientation.

In Generational Poverty, particularly you most likely find traits such as:

* Survival orientation, no long-range planning. Living in the tyranny of the moment**.** Thefuture holds nothing new, just more emergencies.
* Relationships are key to survival; strong interdependency that overrules everything
* Fate is the guiding philosophy rather than choice; there is a sense that choices are made by others, not them.
* Chaotic family structures
* Destructive self-talk is that little voice in your head that says, “I can’t do that” or “I don’t know what to do next” or “I am so stupid”. When you are consistently made to feel “less than” because of the color of your skin, the faith you were raised in, or the circumstances of your birth, it is hard to be your own champion.

**The Hidden Rules**

The *Bridges Out of Poverty* concept refers to the **Hidden Rules (link to Hidden Rules exercise)** or skill sets of every economic class. For example, a wealthy person knows how to import a foreign car, a middle-class person can pay to get his car fixed when it breaks, an under-resourced person knows the bus routes. According to the Bridges program, “poverty is the extent to which an individual does without resources.” Economic class is not as much reflective of intelligence or work ethic as it is a reflection of the coping strategies and resources one has from birth, into childhood, and beyond.

Knowing how to behave in a workplace, how to use a formal language register and how to find information are skills that the middle class take for granted; people in the middle class have absorbed the hidden rules of their class. For example, when addressing a person of authority, we speak with respect. If the only authority figures a child has encountered are the bill collector or a landlord evicting his family, the reaction will be more defensive than respectful. When a person has no dream of escaping menial labor, a boss’s demands only reinforce hopelessness and are met with anger and frustration.

Schools, social service agencies and organizations like the Christ Child Society have an opportunity to make resources available and to share the hidden rules in an effort to break the cycle of poverty.

**Protective Factors**

Another perspective on being under-resourced comes from “Strengthening Families™,

a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.  It is based on engaging families, programs and communities in building five protective factors:

* Parental resilience
* Social connections
* Knowledge of parenting and child development
* Concrete support in times of need
* Social and emotional competence of children.”

[www.strengtheningfamilies.net](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net)

According to the Center for the Study of Social Policy, these Protective Factors are conditions or attributes of all individuals, families, or communities that mitigate or eliminate risk. Families are successful when these protective factors are “robust and present in their communities.” Strengthening Families is a common framework for community partners to use when addressing family issues. For a CCS chapter, this is our starting point when approaching community partners and perhaps eventually become the basis of community-wide change.

Most CCS chapters are already engaged in ‘concrete support’ with the distribution of layettes and clothing. A potential outreach program for entire families can serve to strengthen one or more of these protective factors. The Toledo Chapter’s Parenting Today’s Kids program uses the Strengthening Families concepts as its basis and can be a model for other parent support programs.

For more information, find a Resource List **here** (link to Poverty and Culture Resource List)

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