

## **AMERICA'S BEST KEPT SECRET:** The Truth about Poverty and Its Effect on Our Nation's Youth

**Katelyn Tocci\***  
Undergraduate Student, Division of Education, Rivier College

### **Introduction**

“Miss Katie!” yelled one of my youngest and most beloved students as she ran up to me and jumped into my arms. That is the way that she always greeted me when she saw me. This girl, I will call her Susie, was my shadow. Wherever I went, she seemed to follow, at least for the two hours that we were at the after-school program. One day after she greeted me, she handed me a picture that she had drawn in art class. “Thank you so much, but don’t you think that someone at home would like to see it first?” I asked. She dropped her head down and under her breath said “No.”

During my first couple of days in the after-school program, I was so excited that I was unable to pay attention to much detail. However, after I had been there for a couple of weeks, I started picking up on a lot more. One day, I noticed that this particular student, who greeted me with a big hug every day, had been coming to school in filthy clothes, sometimes inadequate for the weather. Also, I noticed when she was hugging me that her arms and face were matted with dirt, as though she hadn’t been bathed in a couple of days. Her hair was tangled and dirty and looked like it hadn’t been tended to for at least a month.

One afternoon, Susie was working on an assignment for class. Her teacher had asked the class to make wish lists for the holidays. All of the other children had a number of different toys on their lists, such as “Bratz” dolls, “G.I Joe” action figures, computer games, and DVDS. Susie did not have one toy listed as one of her wishes. Instead of asking for dolls and games, she asked for shirts, socks, pants, and shoes. It broke my heart when I saw that.

Another incident that happened, one that I have never forgotten, took place on a cold day in February. I walked into the cafeteria and, as usual, expected my hug from Susie. Instead, I looked over at her, and she had her head down on the cafeteria table. I went and asked her what was wrong. I will never forget what she said to me. “What’s the matter, Honey?” I asked. She raised her head from the table; her face was white and she had dark circles under her eyes. “I’m just really hungry,” she said. When I asked her what she had for breakfast she replied, “Nothing.” I was shocked. “Didn’t you eat lunch today?” I asked. “No, my mommy forgot to pack me a lunch.”

I just couldn’t believe it. Suddenly at that moment, it all came together. The dirty clothes, the bad hygiene, the wish list of necessities, and now the hunger; this girl was living in poverty. I spoke to the director of the after-school program about what I had seen and heard. She told me that she was completely aware of it and that Susie wasn’t the only child enrolled in the after-school program who was living in poverty. She then added that Susie would soon have to leave the after-school program because her mother, who was severely depressed, could not afford to send her there anymore. My heart broke for this child.

I knew that there was poverty in the United States; I even knew that there was poverty in my town but it wasn't until I became involved with the after-school program that I saw first-hand what it must be like to be a child living in poverty.

So why care? Why care about these children who go to bed hungry and come to school in dirty clothes? Just ask yourself these questions: “‘If I was a hungry child, who could focus only on my empty stomach, would I be able to focus in school?’”, “‘If I was a child with bad hygiene who constantly worried about being ridiculed by my peers, would I want to do well in school?’”, “‘If I were a child who did poorly in school, is it likely that I would enjoy school?’” and “ ‘If I were a child who did not enjoy school, how would I become motivated to do better?’” Motivation is clearly an important tool for success. Again, ask yourself, “‘if I was unmotivated, and never became motivated, would it be likely that I would become a productive member of society?’” It is the resiliency and motivation of individuals that make them successful. Therefore, if a child is not taught or given the drive to succeed; the likelihood of that child being able to support him or herself later on in life is slim.

Why care? Care because poverty is like a vicious cycle. When children are unmotivated in school, it becomes very difficult for them to take in and learn the skills that they need to become productive members of society as adults. Sadly, if this happens, these children will most likely end up like their parents who are struggling every day just to survive. Things like furthering their education and improving their situations end up taking a back seat to things like eating and providing shelter for their families.

Finding a place to sleep for the night is more important than helping their child with homework. Working overtime at the third job of the day is more important than attending their child's school play. The sad truth is, all of these priorities are more important; they have to be. Living in poverty for many parents comes with decisions, tough decisions that have to be made every day. Pay the rent or buy groceries? Go and see my child's school play or pick up that extra shift?

The fact is, this is happening all over the nation; it is happening in our town, and in our schools. There are plenty of services out there to help families in need such as soup kitchens, shelters, WIC, food stamps, free housing and the Salvation Army. These are all wonderful services that have done a lot of good for a lot of people. However, they are only temporary fixes. I am not saying that these aren't noble gestures, but there has got to be a more permanent solution we can pursue. “‘If you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day. If you teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime.’” This Chinese proverb represents exactly what we can do to provide a long term solution for these children. If we give a child the food, clothes, and shelter that he needs to get by, he will be fed, clothed, and warm for a while. If we teach the child how to become a productive member of society, one day he will be able to feed, clothe, and provide shelter for himself.

### **Defining the Problem: Poor Kids in Our Nation**

When you think of the word poverty, what does it mean to you? A lot of people have different views on poverty. Some people think of it as only being in third-world countries. Others think of it as happening to victims of terrible tragedies. But the truth is, it is happening right here in the United States. In “*Who are America's Poor Children?*” Sarah Fass and Nancy Cauthen tell us that “37 million Americans live below the poverty line.” Among that 37 million, there are “12 million children living in families whose income is less than the federal poverty level, which is about 16,000 for a family of three and 19,000 for a family of four.” Children living in poverty face hardships every day of their lives. Some children go without food some nights because a third of their parent's income has to go towards the rent for that

month. Some children even lack health insurance which makes it impossible to get health care with the cost of doctor's visits and prescription drugs (Fass and Cauthen). Families who do not have health care are less likely to take their children to the doctor or the dentist because they do not have the money to pay for medical bills.

Yes, there are federal services available such as "Healthy Kids" for families to fall back on when medical issues arise, but this service is not always available. According to the NH Healthy Kids website, whether or not a family has to pay for a service such as "Healthy Kids" depends on income. For example, take a family of four, whose monthly income is about \$1,648 before taxes (which is what two adults would make at \$5.15 per hour in a forty hour week). The minimum monthly payment for "Healthy Kids" is twenty-five dollars per month, per child, between the ages of one and nineteen ([www.nhhealthykids.com](http://www.nhhealthykids.com)). Let's take a more in depth look:

For a family whose monthly income is \$1,648:

$$\begin{aligned}
 &(\$1,648 \text{ a month}) \times (12 \text{ months a year}) = \$19,776 \text{ a year;} \\
 &(2 \text{ children}) \times (\$25 \text{ a month for Healthy Kids payment}) = \$600 \text{ a year;} \\
 &\mathbf{Annual Total} = (\$19,776 \text{ a year}) - (\$600 \text{ for Healthy Kids payment}) = \mathbf{\$19,176.}
 \end{aligned}$$

Now let's think about all of the other finances that this family has to face. This family of four has \$19,176 left in the year. That equals \$1,598 a month. Here are some of the monthly payments for a typical four-person family in Nashua, New Hampshire, according to the Basic Family Budget Calculator provided by The Economic Policy Institute:

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\text{Annual Housing} = (\text{Monthly Housing- } \$1,038) \times (12 \text{ months a year}); \\
 &\text{Annual Transportation} = (\text{Monthly Transportation- } \$375) \times (12 \text{ months a year}); \\
 &\text{Annual Food} = (\text{Monthly Food- } \$587) \times (12 \text{ months a year}); \\
 &\text{Annual Other Necessities} = (\text{Monthly Other Necessities- } \$439) \times (12 \text{ months a year}); \\
 &\text{Annual Taxes} = (\text{Monthly Taxes- } \$364) \times (12 \text{ months a year}); \\
 &\mathbf{Annual Total} = \mathbf{\$33,636.}
 \end{aligned}$$

So, as you can see, a family of four living in poverty would have to give up a lot in order to just get by. The \$600 for Healthy Kids may not seem like very much, but think about how much \$600 would be worth to a family who lives in poverty, where every penny counts.

A small increase in the minimum wage would have a profound impact on struggling families. How is a person, let alone a family, supposed to live off of six or seven dollars an hour? I think that by raising the minimum wage, millions of families would be affected. According to authors Furman and Parrott, raising the minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25 would be essential in helping families get out of poverty and staying on their budget. Let's look back at the facts from earlier:

Two parents at \$5.15 per hour times 40 hours a week:

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\text{Monthly Income Estimation} = (\$412 \text{ per week}) \times (\text{four weeks}) = \$1,648 \text{ a month;} \\
 &\mathbf{Annual Income Estimation} = (\$1,648 \text{ a month}) \times (12 \text{ months a year}) = \mathbf{\$19,776.}
 \end{aligned}$$

Two parents at \$7.25 per hour times 40 hours a week:

Monthly Income Estimation = (\$580 per week) × (four weeks) = \$2,320 a month;  
**Annual Income Estimation** = (\$2,320 a month) × (12 months a year) = **\$27, 840.**

That is an \$8,176 difference. That could be the difference between whether a child eats that week or has a place to sleep. As you can see, by simply raising the minimum wage by only a few dollars, a difference can be made and maybe one less child will be without food, clean clothes, and a home. Even more importantly, one more child will know that he is worthy of a full and happy life.

Shouldn't the act of pulling our fellow citizens out of poverty be our first priority? Shouldn't social services, health care, and education be first on the list? So where are all of our tax dollars going towards? According to the Baltimore Emergency Response Network, "Most taxes pay for military spending and interest on the debt, leaving little for education, the environment and other local needs" ("How Federal Tax"). It is pretty sad that the government sees military spending and interest on the debt to be their two top priorities. Why are these priorities higher than the protection and welfare of our nation's children?

Children aren't affected in only the homes, or sometimes streets, in which they live. They are also affected in the classroom. Thank goodness for public school, or else these children would have a slim chance of ever getting themselves out of poverty. Even though attending school does not require a fee or a monthly payment, poor kids in our nation's schools are still facing a number of hardships that set them back from succeeding in the classroom. In "The Effects of Poverty on Teaching and Learning," Karen M. Pellino lists a number of ways in which a child struggles in the classroom because of poverty. One of the first struggles that she mentions is mobility.

Children of poverty, according to Pellino, may move from town to town as their parent searches for work or runs from problems (such as an abusive spouse, criminal record, or financial responsibilities). They may live in homeless shelters or battered women's shelters that only allow brief stays. They may live on the streets. The conditions they live in and their day-to-day life experiences can have a significant effect on their education and achievement (Pellino). It is hard for children to be excited about school and learning when they don't even know if they will be there the following week to learn the next lesson.

Another struggle described by Pellino mentions concerns parenting. Because the parent-child relationship is the primary context for early behavioral, social and cognitive development, negative effects on parents due to poverty in turn have a negative effect on the development of the child. Children rely on their parents to mediate their environment, respond to their needs, and provide emotional stimulation and support. If, because of poverty related stresses, the parent is unable to do this, the child's development could be delayed or be otherwise negatively affected (Pellino). Again, I have seen it first-hand through my experiences with Susie and others like her. Parenting and home life have the most important effect on a child's life. Parents, who only have the time to worry about how they are going to pay the rent next month, or how they are going to put food on the table, often unintentionally neglect the emotional needs of their children, which could be the deciding factor of whether or not their children end up the way that they did. I want to stress that this is not the fault of the parents. The decisions they are making are ones that have great merit. The concerns, such as the ones mentioned above, are ones that no parent should ever have to have. All these people are trying to do is provide for and protect their children. When living in poverty, sometimes, unfortunately, the extra luxuries that some of us may take for granted need to be put off until later. And for some, later may never come.

### Poor Kids in Nashua

I have lived in Nashua, New Hampshire for my entire life. I guess you could say that I was a privileged child. I never went without food, clothes, shelter, education, or entertainment. Even if my parents were struggling, I never knew it. Now as an adult, I realize that my parents worked very hard to make sure I never knew that they struggled. My father worked three jobs for a while and my mother worked part-time. They were living paycheck to paycheck in order to ensure that my brother and I had everything that we needed and more. If I wanted a new outfit for picture day, I got it. If I needed a haircut, my mother would take me the very next day. I never thought that there was poverty in Nashua, simply because I had never seen it up until recently. Along with Susie, “there are 1,904 Nashua children living in poverty” (Landrigan 10). I have worked at two “inner-city schools” in Nashua as a dance teacher for an after-school program. As inner-city schools both schools are considered to be low-income, with a higher rate of children living in poverty. I have met and formed relationships with a number of these children who are living in poverty. Honestly, when told that some of these students were living in poverty, I was astonished. The reason for this is because they all seemed so much like any other child; they blend in not allowing anyone to differentiate them from anyone else based on their lives at home. They reminded me of myself as a kid. Most are extremely happy, bubbly, and respectful. Although this is not the case for a selected few that I have crossed paths with, most of these kids do a good job masking their feelings. However, are they really masking their feelings, or is this just what they are used to? I wonder. When I was a child, I never knew any other way of life than the one I was living. These children must not know that there is so much more out there for them simply because they can’t see too far past their front door right now. I wonder again, when they grow to be my age, will they have the epiphany that I had and realize that what they grew up knowing is not the only way that people live their lives?

From my observations, I have noticed that the children who come from urban communities or are in a family who is currently in poverty tend to have more behavioral issues. They tend to have less motivation to learn and have a tougher time following instructions; a “why bother” attitude is portrayed frequently; and is understandably so. In fact, according to research conducted at the University of Alberta cited in an article entitled “Long-Term Poverty Affects Mental Health of Children,” bullying, lying, and stealing are not uncommon behaviors for a child living in poverty. Again, I stress, it is not the child’s fault. How are they supposed to concentrate in school if they have empty bellies? How are they supposed to do well when they know that their family is being evicted from the home? Unfortunately, “the number of families with serious financial problems is growing” (Landrigan 10). Child poverty is getting worse in this state a lot more quickly than it is getting better (Landrigan 10). This is the problem. Now, how do we fix it? The 21<sup>st</sup> century program is working towards helping students pave their ways to a bright future.

### Proposing a Solution: Employment with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program

In my senior year of high school, I was given the opportunity to work with an organization called the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program is an after-school program which provides food, homework help, and various activities for children to partake in after school lets out. In my application, I mentioned that I had been involved in a community theater group for about ten years and also choreographed several of the children’s productions put on by the Nashua Jr. Actorsingers. After being hired, I was given the responsibility of working as a dance teacher after school. I was beside myself with excitement to get started, to meet the children, and to share my love for dance with them. On my first

day, I walked down the hall to the cafeteria, where the children wait before their classes begin. My hands were full with my portable CD player, my dance bag containing my CD collection, and a notebook full of dances that I planned on teaching throughout the year. I was ecstatic. I walked into the cafeteria, and it was the complete and polar opposite of what I had expected. In my mind, I envisioned a group of children sitting at the cafeteria tables patiently waiting for their names to be called to line up for their first class. I envisioned a group of school children that you might see in an old movie; compliant, respectful, and ready to learn. Boy, was I far off. When I walked in, I saw about seventy-five children of all races and ethnicities running wild in the cafeteria. The director of the program had to actually use a microphone to make her voice loud enough for the children to hear over the overwhelming amount of noise that the children were making. I stood there in the doorway; my mouth wide open, thinking no longer about the perfect children I had built up in my head but thinking that I was in big trouble and these children were going to eat me alive. Had I not been grasping my belongings with everything I had in me, I believe that I would have dropped them to the floor due to the sudden moistness that came upon my palms.

After the director spent about twenty minutes to just get the children to settle down, I finally met my class. I took them down to the music room, my classroom, and attempted to begin class. Even though my memory of that first class is a blur, I do remember coming home completely exhausted. I felt as though I had been riding a roller coaster for the entire two hours I had been there. There were parts of the day when I was having the best time of my life, and other times where I wanted to rip my hair out. Some of these children had cocky, smart-mouthed attitudes like I had never imagined such young kids could have. It seemed to be a game amongst them to see who could break me first. This does not count for the majority of the children, but there were definitely some children who lacked any form of respect for anyone, including themselves, much less me.

After being with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program for two years now, I know where all of this chaos and built up hostility comes from. Some of these children have been in school from seven in the morning with the breakfast program to eight at night at the Boys and Girls club. These kids are exhausted. They are frustrated and they feel neglected. Now that I understand this, I try to throw out little life lessons in my dance classes every chance that I can get. For example, when a child says, "I can't do it!" I look at them and say, "You are not allowed to use that word in my classroom because you can do anything that you set your mind to." I also tell them all the time that "I only accept attitude in your dancing." I make sure that I am constantly telling the kids how great and how capable they are to do and be anything that they want to be. I make myself available for them to talk to if they are having a problem and I put together talent and dance shows to build their self confidence. The students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century program and I now have a mutual respect for one another. Although it took some time to build the trust needed to form any kind of rapport, it is well worth it knowing that these kids feel safe and understood when they are with us at the after-school program. Helping these kids find the positive in themselves, their peers, and in life in general has been the greatest gift to me.

Because of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program, a number of children are being helped who live their lives in poverty. It allows parents to work an extra two hours if needed, it provides homework help and tutoring for the kids, and it keeps them entertained with amusing and age appropriate activities. I feel privileged that I was chosen to be a person who could possibly make a difference in these kids' lives and I feel grateful to these kids who have undoubtedly and forever made a difference in my life.

Is the 21st Century Program a long-term solution to the problem of child poverty? No, but it is a step in reaching the goal of ending or even reducing the effects of child poverty. I realize that this may seem like an impossible goal to reach. However, it is the small alterations in our society, such as raising

the minimum wage and the humble programs that motivate our nation's children, such as the 21<sup>st</sup> century Program, that inch us closer and closer to improving education for children of poverty in this nation. We as a nation need to come together and make a commitment, and this commitment has to be a major driving force for change.

### **What Else Can Be Done? Helping Students Understand**

Now, as a senior in college, I have come to learn many techniques on how to help children such as Susie, and I am still learning to this very day. Each day, I find myself being presented with new and exciting challenges, as I am still employed at the same inner city school where I worked as a senior in high school. Over the years, I have come to discover some interesting and powerful ways to help children gain a better understanding of just how tough the real world is and how important an education is to succeeding in the real world.

Money. It is a part of many school's mathematics curriculums. Children need to know the values for each denomination, which presidents are imprinted on each bill, how many pennies it takes to make a dollar, how much three one dollar bills, a nickel, and four pennies equals, and so on. The one thing that should be included in these teachings, but rarely is, is the important skill of knowing the "value of a dollar."

Teachers should take time out of the day to help their students understand and appreciate how much things such as rent, water, heat, food, clothes, and other necessities that are taken for granted actually cost.

While flipping through the channels one evening, I came to an episode of Dr. Phil entitled "How to Talk to Your Kids about Money" (27, March 2009.) In the episode, Dr. Phil had recruited several boys and girls to participate in a lesson about money. He showed the children pictures of necessary items such as the ones mentioned above and asked them to take a guess on how much each item costs per month or year. When asked how much they thought groceries cost, one of the children guessed "Like, \$20?" Another boy responded, "Well, sometimes, like, hundreds of dollars." When Dr. Phil revealed that in actuality, groceries cost between four and six hundred dollars every month, the children were dumbfounded.

Another television show that comes to mind is one of the first episodes of "The Cosby Show." On this episode, Theo, the son, comes home with a horrendous report card. Dr. Huxtable, the father, then approaches him and asks him how he expects to get into college with grades such as the ones on his report card. He replies by telling his father that he does not need to go to college because he is going to be a "regular person." Dr. Huxtable then goes on to teach his son a valuable lesson. "What kind of salary do you expect for a "regular person"?" he asks. Theo then replies with a relatively high number for a person who did not attend college, even at that time, "\$250 a week." Dr. Huxtable then proceeds to hand his son \$1200 (per month) in Monopoly money, implying that he is giving him much more than what a "regular person" would actually be bringing in a week. Once Theo arrogantly takes his money, thinking, "Alright! I'll take it," Dr. Huxtable bursts his bubble by saying, "And I will take \$350 for taxes." This dialogue goes on and on, with Dr. Huxtable deducting more and more of Theo's "salary" for necessary items such as rent, food, and entertainment. In the end, Theo is left with nothing. This lesson helped Theo to realize that if he wants to be able to do more than just "get by" in life then he needs to get an education.

It is truly amazing that children have so little insight into how much things cost. We need to educate our children about money, like Dr. Huxtable did for Theo and like Dr. Phil did for the children

on his show. It's hard enough for a college educated person to get by, but these types of practical lessons will emphasize how much more difficult it is for someone with less education. It will show them how hard they will have to work to not only make money but keep some of it once they have paid taxes and allocated money to the necessary items needed for survival. If teachers can integrate these lessons into their daily classroom routines, then students, especially children in poverty, may just come to appreciate how hard their parents work and will hopefully realize that they can have more for themselves.

One way to do this could be to assign a job to each student in the classroom. At the end of each week, the students could collect their weekly salaries. It will be up to the teacher to decide what the salary will be: Monopoly money, coins, tokens or tickets. The students could then be taught how to use their money by opening a class bank, giving the students the option to save, spend, or split their money. Teaching the students the value of a dollar at a young age will hopefully instill in them a sense of responsibility that they will carry with them into their adulthood.

## Notes

This essay was written in the spring of 2006. As of today, some of the points in this paper, such as the cost of living and the minimum wage in Nashua, NH may be different. However, although the numbers may be different, the ratios between the statistics mentioned in this paper remain accurate.

## Works Cited

- "Basic Family Budget Calculator." Economic Policy Institute. September, 2005. Retrieved June 16, 2009, from [http://www.epinet.org/content.cfm/datazone\\_fambud\\_budget/](http://www.epinet.org/content.cfm/datazone_fambud_budget/).
- Fass, Sarah and Cauthen, Nancy. "*Who are America's Poor Children?*" National Center for Children in Poverty. March, 2003. Retrieved June 16, 2009, from [http://www.nccp.org/pub\\_cpt05b.html](http://www.nccp.org/pub_cpt05b.html).
- Furman, Jason and Parrott, Sharon. "A \$7.25 Minimum Wage Would be a Useful Step in Helping Working Families Escape Poverty." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. January 5, 2007. Retrieved June 16, 2009, from <http://www.cbpp.org/1-5-07mw.htm>.
- "How Federal Tax Dollars Are Being Spent." The Baltimore Chronicle and the Sentinel. May 2, 2001.
- Landrigan, Kevin. "Great Divide." The Nashua Telegraph. January 12, 2007.
- "Long-Term Poverty Affects Mental Health of Children." Science Daily. February 9, 2006. Retrieved June 16, 2009, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/02/060206171449.htm>.
- New Hampshire Healthy Kids. 2006. 15 April 2007. Retrieved June 16, 2009, from <http://www.nhhealthykids.com/>.
- Pellino, Karen. "The Effects of Poverty on Teaching and Learning." Retrieved June 16, 2009, from <http://www.teach-nology.com/Articles/teaching/poverty/>.
- "How to Talk to Your Kids about Money" The Dr. Phil Show. 27 March 2009. Retrieved June 16, 2009, from <http://www.drphil.com/slideshows/slideshow/5073/?id=5073&showID=1252>.
- The Cosby Show Pilot Episode. Retrieved June 16, 2009, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFY0HBKUm8o>.

---

\* **KATELYN TOCCI** is currently a senior at Rivier College with a tri-major of Elementary Education, Special Education, and Human Development. She has been employed with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century program since her senior year of high school as a dance teacher. Katelyn has also been involved with the Nashua Actorsingers where she has performed both on stage and behind the scenes as a choreographer for several of the Jr. Actorsingers productions. In the future she hopes to attend graduate school to obtain a Master's degree in the areas of reading and learning disabilities.