

# The Challenge of Multigenerational Poverty

Herbert J. Gans

*It is extraordinary how little we know about what the author calls multigenerational poverty. Is poverty passed on from generation to generation in significant numbers? If so, does this imply that different public policies are needed than we now have? This expert in the field raises new and necessary questions.*

**I**N AMERICA, poverty is generally perceived as a temporary economic state, thanks in part to the American dream of permanent upward mobility.

Nonetheless, many people are poor for many years, others for most if not all of their lives, and some may have been poor for generations. Since no one seems to have looked for or at them, this paper explores what I call multigenerational poverty, asks whether it exists, suggests what we need to find out about it, and discusses some implications for antipoverty policy.

The paper also considers two corollary hypotheses. The first is that the most serious and intractable American poverty is multigen-

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erational and that the people who have been poor for two or more generations experience a disproportionate share of all poverty-related problems, their own and the country's.

The second hypothesis suggests that most if not almost all of the multigenerationally poor are also severely poor—earning less than half the poverty-line income of \$22,000 in 2008. I described the severely poor in my 2009 *Challenge* article (Gans 2009), and this article is in some respects a sequel about very long-term, severe poverty.

Admittedly, it is possible that multigenerational poverty is numerically insignificant, but it seems unlikely. America still contains a number of subregional “pockets of poverty” as well as poor rural communities, small towns, and urban neighborhoods that have been poor for a long time.

In addition, today's poverty can sow the seeds of multigenerational poverty. We know that extensive spells of unemployment and underemployment often result in many years of subsequent employment at low wages even when good times return. This type of downward economic mobility can leave its marks on the next generation, beginning with children's poor school performance and other problems that could have longer-term economic effects (Oreopolous et al. 2005). Likewise, a number of illnesses and other problems associated with current poverty are frequently passed on to future generations.

For example, abused children can, as adults, abuse their own children and thereby effectively hinder them from escaping poverty. In fact, as I suggested in the earlier article, poverty probably causes traumatic stress disorders as well as post-traumatic ones in some people, and the effects of these disorders may hold down future generations.

Obviously, multigenerational poverty should have been looked into long ago, and not only for scholarly reasons. Since at least the end of the 1960s' War on Poverty, American antipoverty policy has “creamed”; that is, many of its programs have been targeted to the working poor and to others who can be helped comparatively easily and in large numbers with the minimal budgets usually allotted to antipoverty programs.

However, the multigenerationally poor, like other severely poor people, need help the most. Providing such help could also lift the

political fortunes of antipoverty policy, for mainstream America might then feel more kindly toward the poor people it now stigmatizes as undeserving.

Programs to shrink the number of multigenerationals would produce another positive effect: a reduction in the size of America's economically excluded population that Myrdal (1963) called the underclass. Since that underclass is heavily nonwhite, it is also an undercaste, much like gypsies and the indigenous and aborigine populations found in countries all over the globe.

## **Research Questions About Multigenerational Poverty**

What, then, do we need to know about multigenerational poverty? I suggest that three sets of questions are most urgently in need of answer.

First, we have to find out how many of the currently poor are descendants of one or more generations of poor ancestors. Information must be compiled on their incomes, including how many are living in severe poverty. We must also know whether they are held back economically more by the severity of their current poverty or by its intergenerational duration, and whether relieving them from severe poverty might end its multigenerational effects.

Their sources of income should be determined; so should their place of residence. Do they live in pockets of poverty; in rural, small town, urban or suburban areas, and does geographic location affect their poverty and related ways of life? Are multigenerational rural and urban poverty different, and in what ways?

Second, the roles and functions that generation plays in their lives have to be understood. The concept of multigenerational poverty hypothesizes that poverty can be passed on directly and indirectly to the next generation and that it could worsen with every generation that people remain in poverty. However, more specific knowledge is also needed: Which conditions, factors, and processes, economic and other, take place during and between generations that create the persistence of poverty?

One might expect, or at least hypothesize, that, all other things being equal, later-generation poor people will be worse off than earlier-generation ones, because each has inherited some of the problems passed on by earlier ones. However, this might not be true automatically, and particularly in a growing economy. In that case, a number of later-generation poor people could manage to move out of poverty if they have not been permanently damaged by their heritage and are in the right place at the right time.

In theory it is even possible that in some pockets of poverty, people reach an intergenerational stasis: an unchanging economic environment and a modicum of social stability enable them to develop coping patterns, including low expectations for the future, that allow them to live relatively normal lives without traumatic problems for themselves and others.

I should point out that generational patterns can be identified among other populations as well: the third- and later-generation rich differ in some respects from the so-called new rich; and people whose great-grandparents graduated from college will more often be found among the country's elite than equally talented people who are the first college graduates in their families.

Likewise, immigration research indicates that second generations differ from their immigrant parents in some uniform ways, and third and later generations do so as well. However, immigration researchers study the effects of a set of closely related changes, not of a multifaceted economic, social, and political condition like poverty.

Comparative generational research might indicate that some general patterns of change between generations can be discovered. If so, and if such research applies to the study of multigenerational poverty, it may be possible to identify a general cumulation process from the first generation in poverty to later ones. Perhaps particular problems and behavior patterns arise in one generation, exerting a cumulative effect as they reach later generations.

Then one can ask what effects, positive or negative, does each low-income generation experience; what conditions, problems, as well as survival skills and coping patterns, are passed on from generation

to generation and how? Are multigenerationally poor people better able to cope than those newly confronted with the same degree of poverty? Or does generation become irrelevant if and when the economy in which the poor are embedded changes between and during generations?

Third, the generational effects of the various problems and crises that might be associated with poverty need to be identified. These problems can be divided into the following:

1. *Hereditary and transmitted diseases and similar incapacities.* Although some chronic illnesses and physiological handicaps are passed on, others, including addictions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next. They are passed on either because they influence child rearing or because similar socioeconomic conditions affect the next generation similarly, for example, by producing a new cohort of addicts.

If two generations suffer from the same severe poverty, it is reasonable to assume that each generation might independently turn to alcohol, drugs, or some other form of escape and oblivion. And is this pattern also applicable to the stress-related illnesses, such as some kinds of mental illness, heart disease, strokes, and the like, from which poor people suffer at higher rates?

As I noted above, abusing parents may transmit the abusing pattern to the next generation, and the same process may apply to other intrafamilial forms of violence. If a fragile self-respect is transmitted, the interpersonal violence sometimes generated by such fragility may continue for another generation as well.

2. *Poverty-related situational crises.* Poor people experience many more crises of various kinds than the better off, a number of which may have reverberations that can last into the next generation and beyond. I suggested previously that various forms of downward occupational mobility can set processes into motion that have negative consequences for children's school performance and later life. Similar losses, whether of jobs, welfare benefits, or access to low-cost housing could produce the same or worse effects among the poor.

Many other troubles can have intergenerational consequences. Ex-

felons are especially disadvantaged in the job market, and even an arrest record, a common handicap for poor males, can sometimes hold back their children. In small towns and neighborhoods where “everyone knows everyone else,” the descendants of stigmatized people, for example “ne’er-do-wells” and “welfare dependents,” may inherit the parental stigmas.

3. “*Vulnerabilities.*” All of us vary in the degree to which we are vulnerable to problems and crises. Poor people do not differ in this respect, except that they face many more problems and crises without the material and other resources to deal with them that are available to the better off. It is, however, possible that the continuing barrage of problems and crises that they encounter enable some to develop survival skills of a kind that better-off people do not need.

Whether vulnerability, resilience, and survival skills increase or decrease over the generations is also a relevant empirical question. Individuals presumably vary most in this respect, but among the poor particularly, the family, however structured, is both the most vulnerable institution and the first line of defense. It is the initial target of economic adversity and the social and other problems that follow, but it must also initiate defensive and other responses.

Families are figuratively and regularly battered by poverty, and when family members lack the resilience, skills—and support groups—they often batter each other literally. Intrafamily abuse and family breakup are among the typical outcomes, but so is the single-parent family that becomes a preemptive solution for women who choose it in part to forestall familial conflict, spousal and child abuse, and other emotional hardships.

Poor single-parent families generally have lower incomes than poor two-parent families, making it harder for them to escape poverty or to enable their children to do so. The daughters of single parents are at risk of becoming single parents themselves, thus increasing the possibility that family poverty will be passed on. Moreover, the higher rate of family breakup that accompanies poverty means that two-parent families can also suddenly be damaged by economic and other crises that then affect the next generation.

Because rates of abuse and single parenthood have been rising over the past several decades, a hypothesis that family vulnerability increases in each generation seems justified. Similar hypotheses about heightened vulnerability should be considered for other important social relationships. One could ask, for example, whether the ability to make and hold friends, or to participate in informal and formal groups, such as religious ones, declines with each generation in poverty.

4. *Racial and class factors.* Many of the country's multigenerational poor are African American and from other nonwhite populations. Racial stigmatization, discrimination, and segregation not only are continuing obstacles for the nonwhite poor, but also often continue to shackle future generations.

Moreover, a sizable proportion of multigenerationals are the descendants of Southern, Caribbean, and Latin American slaves. Consequently, one must ask whether slavery—and the long-term social and economic restrictions imposed on ex-slaves after emancipation—has enduring effects (Patterson 1998). Stereotypes deployed during slavery have persisted to this day. Thus, one must ask what other components of slavery have survived, and whether they have perpetuated or worsened poverty beyond that experienced by poor people whose ancestors were not enslaved.

Patterson also argues that African-American familial vulnerability is in part a result of slave owners' breaking up of slave families by selling individual members, as well as forcing the wives of slaves to become their involuntary sex partners. Such effects may differ with the varieties of slave-owner practices across the Western Hemisphere and may explain the apparently somewhat lower familial vulnerability of poor Latino immigrants and their descendants (Telles and Ortiz 2008).

Conversely, rates of family breakup were high among poor European immigrants during periods of economic depression, although variations may exist among those whose ancestors endured various forms of peonage. Yet other variables must be considered, such as the particularly punitive forms of racial discrimination especially aimed at poor African Americans.

Race plays another role for poor whites. Since the majority of whites, at least those not living in poor white communities or poverty pockets, have escaped poverty over the past half-century, many of the remaining poor ones, particularly in the cities, may suffer from a variety of handicaps that have immobilized them for generations.

Class needs to be considered as a social as well as economic factor. Social inequality creates negative effects that are independent of economic inequality, adding to lack of self-respect, stress, depression, and all their consequences (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). If multigenerationals are (or are in danger of being) located in an economic underclass, they will in addition suffer more severely from inequality than other poor people.

5. *Coping patterns.* Not all generational effects are negative, and some may enable poor people to cope with multigenerational poverty. Empirical research among the multigenerational poor will have to identify these patterns, but they are likely to be habitual practices and routines as well as social relationships and institutional ties that may have been handed down from past generations. These patterns and habits may themselves become multigenerational because they have proven successful, not only for ensuring sheer survival but for creating some stability. They are also a significant source of the satisfaction and pleasure that very poor people can enjoy and may help them maintain hope for a better future.

Some of these coping patterns resemble those practiced by better-off people, but many are probably very different. The crucial empirical question is which of these patterns, if any, can help people leave poverty when economic conditions improve, and which, if any, prevent them from doing so and continue to keep them poor.

I use the term “coping pattern” for three reasons. First, it accurately describes how poor people deal with frequently occurring problems and crises. Second, it is an alternative term for culture. It may therefore encourage researchers to avoid the term “culture of poverty,” which has been used to blame the poor for their own poverty, and has aided conservatives in opposing antipoverty programs.

Third, coping patterns lend themselves far more easily to empirical

study than culture does. Thus, studying them would help us determine which have good, bad, or neutral consequences, and which are passed on to the next generation.

The coping patterns that could help poor people to exit poverty cannot be identified until the appropriate economic opportunities appear available. However, during past world wars, when everyone able to work was put to work, many poor people suddenly stopped being poor. They obviously knew how to cope.

### **Some Policy Implications**

Antipoverty policy to deal with multigenerational poverty cannot be intelligently formulated until we learn from the now invisible multigenerationals themselves and from research about and among them. Actually, the first step must make them visible, to acquaint policymakers and politicians with their problems and to generate “political will” to aid them.

Some of the needed programs will resemble those I have described for reducing severe poverty (Gans 2009). These have to begin with jobs programs, but many of the poor have little to offer in the labor market. Consequently, income supports will be as urgent as jobs programs. However, elected officials and voters will probably need to be persuaded that multigenerational poverty is a societally caused and historically generated disability before they will assent to disability-related income support programs.

The multigenerational poor will also need medical and other programs to counter chronic illnesses, including those inherited from past generations. Support systems to help people overcome and prevent crises will be needed as well. The coping patterns that multigenerationals have used for such purposes will provide some guidelines and models for such systems.

Children must be distanced from ancestral economic and other conditions that made familial poverty multigenerational but without separating them from their families. The many preschool educational programs now operating in low-income neighborhoods may provide

clues for some of what needs to be done. Even so, many young people will need post-school help in the labor market.

Nonetheless, the greatest challenge is offering the right help to the adults living with the traumas of generations of severe poverty. Some may be able to leave poverty, but those unable to work or find work must be helped to make as useful and satisfying a life as possible by other means.

Aiding the multigenerational poor could be politically risky. Making them visible also exposes them to the possibility of becoming the newest incarnation of the undeserving poor. Indeed, if the country is not soon restored to economic good health, some of its most politically alienated citizens may go looking for new low-income scapegoats for America's economic and political problems.

## **Researching Multigenerational Poverty**

Studying multigenerational poverty is not going to be easy. Poor people do not usually keep family records or create family histories. They may also have lost track of their ancestors more frequently than better-off people have.

Consequently, databases with multigenerational samples of poor people will have to be found, and new ones developed. Some genealogical research among poor people should be possible as municipal and other local archives are digitized. Moreover, existing databases, including the historical U.S. Census, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and others can be mined for data about least a couple of generations.

The literatures of intergenerational research, mainly produced by economists (e.g., Bowles et al. 2005) as well as similar literatures in developmental psychology will be particularly useful for identifying findings that can then be studied among multigenerational samples. Life course studies that extend beyond one generation (e.g., Elder 1999) may be similarly useful. Historical works on poverty that contain family biographies can be reanalyzed, and novels about multigenerational characters and communities that are based on some empirical

research should at least provide ideas for future research.

Then there are occasional surprise discoveries, frequently in old files and records stored in back offices and attics. Thus Telles and Ortiz (2008) gained access to the interviews of a 1965 study of Mexican immigrants and could reinterview the respondents and interview their descendants three decades later. They were thus able to obtain some data for four generations of the same families.

Three other kinds of research ought to be undertaken as well. First, ethnographers should move into and study poor neighborhoods and communities in order to identify multigenerationals, focusing especially on three-generation households, the longest-term residents as well as the lowest-status ones. The latter are apt to include people who are often treated as outcasts by the rest of the community and who may be the descendants of earlier outcasts.

An ironic precedent exists for such research—the late-nineteenth-century “family studies” conducted by eugenicists to prove that crime and other kinds of deviant behavior among the poor were genetic in origin (e.g., Rafter 1988). College psychology texts still sometimes discuss the “Jukes” and the “Kallikaks,” households or families that were accused of being retarded and the descendants of a long line of similarly damaged ancestors.

The “studies” were methodologically suspect, and their findings were not credible, but they probably identified severely poor rural people who had been rejected by their communities for generations and were never given a chance to hold normal jobs and act like normal people. They also suffered from a variety of poverty-related diseases, including alcoholism, and since many were illiterate, they could therefore easily be labeled as “morons” by ideologically programmed and untrained interviewers.

Second, poor three-generation households and families, as well as samples of grandparents, should be interviewed about their family histories, with questions about both prior generations and changes during and between generations. Studies have already been conducted among such households (e.g., Burton and Sorensen 1993) and can be expanded to explore multigenerational issues.

Third, some long-term panel studies should be organized, beginning among poor three-generation households and continuing among their descendants. As in other panel studies, participants would be interviewed regularly about their economic status, their problems, and ways of coping with them, as well as about successful and unsuccessful attempts to exit poverty.

In years to come, social scientists will then be able to understand what multigenerational poverty is all about and how it can be eliminated.

### **For Further Reading**

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