



Frequently Asked Questions

What is “systemic” poverty?

Systemic poverty refers to the economic exploitation of people who are poor through laws, policies, practices and systems that perpetuate their impoverished status. We live in a world where not all have equal access to education, transportation, fresh food, financial resources, clean air, water or healthy environments, employment with a living wage, health care, benefits, citizenship and affordable housing. This lack of access creates generational cycles of poverty and a racial wealth gap that are systemic in nature. An individual cannot change their economic and social location easily by just “working harder.” Meanwhile the many, interlocking disadvantages often are compounded by choices to stay near family or a particular location or employment opportunity, or by gender and racial injustice, trauma, violence, immigration status, impacts from climate change and environmental degradation and other complicating issues.

Why are people poor?

Individuals are economically poor for diverse, complicated and unique reasons that stem from living in a world in which economic policies and practices trap some people in persistent poverty while enabling others to accumulate wealth. Wealth or profit often accrues on one side of the equation, often precisely because on the other side of the equation laborers are not paid fair wages, given health or safety protections, employed full-time or long-term, offered benefits, or given voice, power or influence.

Why can’t people work themselves out of poverty?

In the United States, social safety nets and government programs to provide food, housing assistance, health care and employment often fail to meet basic needs and do not provide adequate or equitable access to these resources. Poverty is also often compounded by where a person is born and lives — certain geographic regions, communities and neighborhoods cannot easily access resources that could improve their situations. Around the world, international trade deals, government corruption, armed conflict and climate change exacerbate conditions of poverty. While

there is no simple or easy solution, we do know that communities can become safer, happier and have an increased sense of well-being when they have vision, leadership and find allies in their quest self-empowered sustainable development.

SUGGESTION: Watch “Pain and Poverty in America,” a five-minute video created by the Poor People’s Campaign that takes a close look at what it means to live with a low income or in poverty in the United States. youtu.be/zj5aVF54p-0.

How big a problem is poverty, really?

Poverty is a very real and very large hurdle to well-being, safety and health in our country and our world. In the United States, 1 in 5 children lives in poverty. Nearly half a million Americans do not have a safe home to go to at the end of the day. Further, more than one in seven people in the U.S. lives below the poverty line, an income of \$25,750 for a family of four (HHS Poverty Guidelines, 2019). More than 65 million people worldwide have become refugees, displaced from their homes. Globally, the number of people facing hunger increased by roughly 118 million from 2019 to 2020. Nearly 1.2 billion people in developing countries live in extreme poverty, living on less than \$1.25 a day. While we often depict this as a “poverty problem,” Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty points out in her book *The Problem of Wealth: A Christian Response to a Culture of Affluence* that we actually have a problem of wealth. Unfettered consumerism, savage exploitation of natural resources, wealth accumulation, inequitable distribution of goods, services and labor, climate change and economic control by the powerful — those are also root causes of poverty and the impoverishment of the environment. Moreover, many of our global partners take a more multidimensional view of poverty, one that recognizes that well-being is based on access to social, spiritual and cultural resources and not simply financial ones.



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How can I help? What should I do?

We can participate together — equitably, humbly and mutually — with communities imagining, demanding and creating their well-being. We begin by being present in community, listening and building trusting relationships. Following the lead of people in the midst of circumstances they wish to change, we can be partners in transforming systems and structures that divide communities. We do this believing that God calls us to love one another, to care for the world, and to be a part of God's liberating redemption for all. We are all connected and our well-being is interdependent.

While there is some short-term work that can be helpful, we are invited to consider long-term, systemic work to change ideologies, policies, laws or practices that keep people poor and other people rich also to work to heal and repair historical harm. This longer-term work invites us to engage in advocacy, denouncing poverty systems perpetuated by our governments and demanding significant policy changes to end poverty and create community well-being.

For Presbyterians, we are inviting the church to consider incorporating commitments to end systemic poverty and create communities of well-being through 5 Spiritual Practices. We will attend to these concerns as we: Worship, Learn, Relate, Act, Share. For more information see 5 Spiritual Practices to End Poverty ([hyperlink/URL](#)).

How can I talk with my children about poverty?

Children understand when things are unfair. They can hear that God made us all and loves every person and creature on earth, and that God wishes for all people and creatures to thrive. We all deserve well-being and peace, safety and security, shelter and food. Things are unfair not because someone isn't just as wonderful and worthy as someone else. And things aren't uneven because some people do not work as hard or because they are uneducated (many people work very hard, and even multiple jobs, but still live in poverty). Things are unfair because we humans wrestle with things like greed, pride, envy, gluttony. It's like taking all the toys for yourself and never sharing, but then blaming it on the kids who got their toys taken from them. It's like setting up a game and making the rules so that only you can win. That's not how God wants us to live. The good part is, because the hurt comes from people, and we also are people with hearts and brains and the desire for things to be fair, we can work to be part of the solution. We can change the rules (which we call laws and policies), and we can redistribute the toys (opportunities for good quality education, employment, health care, affordable housing, healthy food, etc.). We do this by sharing some things right now (giving away food, helping to build housing, donating in times of a disaster), while also working to change the rules of who gets what, to make a difference in the future (by voting and lifting up our voices for what we think is right).