

Ending Poverty In Community
A Toolkit for Young Advocates

Lesson 2
The Causes of Poverty

Overview

In the world's richest nation, why does poverty continue to exist? In this activity, participants are challenged to move beyond stereotypes of why people are poor to consider the root causes of poverty. Participants work in groups to build a "wall of poverty" with bricks representing the structural barriers that prevent the poor from realizing their full human potential. They then reflect on ways they can work with the poor to help break down those social structures.



Objectives

- Participants review the extent of poverty in the United States by analyzing the state poverty rates.
- Participants move beyond stereotypes to consider the root causes of poverty by building a "wall of poverty" representing the structural barriers that allow poverty to persist in the world's richest nation.
- Participants reflect on prophetic voices and create a personal response to help break down the wall of poverty in their own community.

Materials for this Lesson:

The handouts for this lesson can be accessed from the EPIC menu on this CD under the Lesson 2 heading. You can also access the handouts online by clicking on the links provided below.

For a list of [materials](#) for Lesson 2, see "Materials Checklist" under the Lesson 2 heading.

Part I: Opening Prayer and Warm-up

(Estimated Time: 15 minutes)

1. Before the class or session, ask participants to bring a can of food to the meeting as a symbol of one way that our faith calls on us to respond. Have the participants deposit the collected food on a table next to an open Bible and a lit candle.
2. Ask a volunteer to proclaim the Scripture passage from [Isaiah 58: 6-11](#). After the reading, ask participants to consider the following questions for large group discussion or silent reflection:
 - *According to the prophet Isaiah, what is God calling us to do?*
 - *Why do you think that hunger and homelessness continue to exist today?*
3. Handout the resource Poverty Rates by State ("Poverty Rates by State," found under the Lesson 2 heading) for participants to look over and reflect.

As participants view the lists, offer the following questions for reflection:

- *What is the rate of poverty in my state?*
- *How does my faith call me to respond to people living in poverty in my state? In my local community?*

Part II: Activity – The Wall of Poverty

(Estimated Times: 30 minutes)

In this activity, participants are challenged to move beyond stereotypes of why people are poor to consider the existence of structural barriers that perpetuate poverty. The barriers that exist throughout society are often beyond the control of an individual person.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered a speech that initiated what he called the “*War on Poverty*.” This speech identified some of the structural barriers that he believed perpetuated poverty in the United States. The facilitator can distribute a copy of [President Johnson’s speech](#) (“War on Poverty Speech,” found under the Lesson 2 heading) and have participants read it. Alternatively, the facilitator can copy the following paragraph from the speech onto the chalkboard or dry erase board and then read it aloud:

“The young man or woman who grows up without a decent education, in a broken home, in a hostile and squalid environment, in ill health or in the face of racial injustice – that young man or woman is often trapped in a life of poverty. He does not have the skills demanded by a complex society. He does not know how to acquire those skills. He faces a mounting sense of despair which drains initiative and ambition and energy...”

Ask participants which of these structural barriers identified by President Johnson continue to exist today. Many of these barriers continue to create a wall that keeps millions of Americans in a state of poverty and unable to realize their full human potential.

Divide participants into small groups based on the barriers identified by President Johnson. Distribute the correlated handouts below so that each member of a group receives an appropriate copy. The handouts provide basic information regarding the various causes of poverty and the challenges people face in attempting to break through the wall.

If there are a large number of participants, create multiple groups for each topic. Assign at least one group to each of the various causes. **The handouts can be found under the Lesson 2 heading.**

Group A: Education and Poverty ([Handout 2A](#))

Group B: Family Environment ([Handout 2B](#))

Group C: Business Cycle ([Handout 2C](#))

Group D: Disabilities and Mental Health ([Handout 2D](#))

Group E: Racial Injustice ([Handout 2E](#))

Provide each group with a large piece of butcher paper, magazines, scissors, glue, and a variety of colored markers. Ask the members of each group to complete the following tasks:

- Write their assigned “structural barrier” in large print on their piece of butcher paper.
- Make their piece of butcher paper look like a “brick” or a “stone.”
- Use pictures, symbols and drawings to illustrate what their barrier means.
- Use pictures, symbols and drawings to illustrate how their structural barrier affects people living in poverty.

After participants have had time to create their “brick,” ask a representative from each group to present their structural barrier to the larger group and then post their brick to create a wall. Each group should have a chance to add its “brick” to the wall.

After all the groups have presented and posted their “brick,” they will have created a wall of poverty. Combined, this structure represents the barriers that prevent a significant number of Americans from breaking through to a life more consistent with human dignity.

Part III: Reflection

(Estimated Time: 15 minutes)

At the beginning of this session, participants donated a can of food to represent a concrete action that addresses poverty. Ask participants the following question: “How did the canned food donation address the cause of poverty that you explored in this activity?”

Supplying a can of food is important but doesn’t resolve the deeper causes of poverty. What can be done beyond our routine actions to address some of these causes – to help take down the “bricks” in the wall of poverty?

Reflection 1

Distribute [Participant Handout 2F](#) (“Handout 2F – Reflection,” found under the Lesson 2 heading) so each participant has one copy. Invite five volunteers to read the quotations printed on the reflection handout to the group. Give participants time to individually reflect on each of the quotations and to consider how their faith calls them to respond to these prophetic voices.

Invite participants to share their reflections with their small group. Ask participants to tape their reflections around the “wall of poverty” – creating a border that addresses the causes and prevents the wall from expanding.

Reflection 2

Now have students move back into small groups and reflect on the following questions:

1. Now that you have learned about some of the root causes of poverty, has your perspective changed about what you think makes people poor in the United States?
2. Can a hardworking individual overcome poverty on their own or are structural changes needed? If the latter, what kind of changes?

3. What outside obstacles might someone who is trying to overcome poverty face?
4. Who is responsible for bringing about such changes?

Additional Resources

For a list of [Additional resources](#) for Lesson 2, see "Additional Resources" under the Lesson 2 heading.

Faith in Action Extension Activities

Activity 1

Display the "wall of poverty" and the ideas for tearing down the bricks in a public place (e.g. parish hall, outside the Church, school cafeteria, main office) to help educate the community about the structural barriers that perpetuate poverty in America.

Activity 2

Ask participants to determine which barriers may exist in their own community. Identify steps that can be taken to address them and post them next to the "wall of poverty."

Activity 3

Invite a news reporter to the next class or session, or have participants write a letter to the newspaper presenting the "wall of poverty."