

How do we talk about poverty effectively?

Fast facts

Americans often use the words “rich” and “poor” or “working class” and “upper class,” but how do we differentiate between conversations about poverty in developing nations vs. the poverty we see in our own communities? Here are some terms that can help.

Relative Poverty

Relative poverty is used to measure wealth in relationship to other members of a distinct population, usually stable first-world countries. The “poverty line” is adjusted to reflect factors such as economic growth, changes in income distribution, and the price and accessibility of necessary goods and services. It can also change based on local social perceptions of what is needed to maintain a certain living standard.

Absolute Poverty

A type of poverty that is the same regardless of location or country and that occurs when the resources required for minimum physical health are lacking, typically defined by limited access to food, clothing, and shelter. The absolute poverty line is determined by the World Bank with input from other organizations.

Food Desert

An area where citizens have limited access to fresh food due to lack of nearby grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and food co-ops. According to the USDA, to qualify as a “low-access community,” at least 500 people and/or at least 33 percent of the census tract’s population must reside more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store (for rural census tracts, the distance is more than 10 miles).

Does your community have a food desert? Check online here:

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/>

Federal Poverty Level (FPL)

A measure of income issued every year by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Federal poverty levels are used to determine your eligibility for certain programs and benefits, which typically require recipients to be at no greater than 100 percent or 130 percent of the FPL.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP is the largest federal nutrition assistance program, formerly known as “food stamps.” SNAP provides benefits to eligible low-income individuals and families via an Electronic Benefits Transfer card. This card can be used like a debit card to purchase

eligible food in authorized retail food stores. To be eligible for SNAP in most cases, you must not make more than 130 percent of the federal poverty line, or \$1,315 of income per month for one person (add \$468 per month for each family member). *Note:* This is different from Spokane Neighborhood Action Program (SNAP).

Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE)

People in the workforce living above the Federal Poverty Level and below the basic cost of living. The ALICE Report is released by state and county, showing the percentage of working households struggling in each area.

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)

TANF, or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, is the primary federal welfare program. With the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, TANF replaced the prior system. TANF requires recipients to work, ranging from 30 hours per week for single parents to 35–55 hours per week for two-parent families. TANF-defined work can cover a variety of forms, including training, community service, on-the-job experience, job search, or actual paid employment. TANF sets a maximum of five years on the program but allows states to exceed that level for 20 percent of its recipients.

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