

# ISSUE 34

## Poverty

Despite a global rise in prosperity in the late 19th century, many people still live in poverty. Some nations seem characterized by a general lack of opportunity, resources, and food, while even in rich, industrialized countries many residents find it difficult to maintain a decent standard of living. Sometimes the underlying problem is one of distribution; other times, it is a drought or famine. The political order in some cases is committed to providing basic needs to its entire population and in others to promoting some groups or interests at the expense of others. But, in general, the old observation that the rich get richer seems to be especially true these days.

### What causes poverty to persist even though society continues to advance materially?

- (1) Individual irresponsibility
- (2) Social structure
- (3) Lack of education
- (4) Economic fluctuation
- (5) Inadequate resources
- (6) Corrupt government



-prosperity : having a lot of money

-distribution : how (sth) is shared

-famine : serious, widespread shortage of food

-observation : comment or remark

-fluctuation : frequent changes in the amount, value, or level of (sth)

-underlying : basic; fundamental

-drought : long period of little or no rainfall

-at the expense of (sb) : causing pain or financial loss to (sb)

-persist : continue; last

# Sample Answers

(A) No matter what a society may be willing to do to help its disadvantaged, unfortunately there are always going to be some people who unfairly take advantage of the system. There are going to be some completely healthy people who are too lazy to work or learn a skill. We can't just let them starve, but it still seems immoral to reward their *shiftlessness* when so many worthy poor need help.

(B) Education is expensive — but not as expensive as ignorance. Nearly everyone can improve his or her economic position by learning a profitable skill or being retrained in new skills. But the positive effects tend to be evident later rather than immediately, and people who have no money are often focused almost *exclusively* on the present. After all, if someone is worried about the next meal, he is not usually able to *think ahead* to how much better things may be a year from now.

## Speak Your Mind

1. Do you think the number of poor people is going up or down? Why?
2. What makes someone rich or poor?
3. The poor are often said to be lazy. Is this a true observation or just a prejudice?
4. The rich are often said to be selfish. Is this true or a generalization?
5. Poverty, like wealth, is often said to be inherited. Can you explain what that means?
6. What are some of the potential social problems when poverty *skyrockets*?
7. Is society responsible for the poor?

# Speak Your Mind

## Speak Your Mind Helpers

### 1. Do you think the number of poor people is going up or down? Why?

(A)

As someone once said, "God must surely love the poor because He made so many of them." And the number keeps rising. It is *heartbreaking* to see the mass poverty that *characterizes* large areas of the globe; but even in a modern, prosperous city, one only needs to travel a few minutes to find equally tragic scenes of human misery.

(B)

The media like to focus on the most visually dramatic scenes, but by so doing they often *misrepresent* reality. In fact, the great mass of *humanity* is much better off than ever before. While there are still areas that *stubbornly* resist noticeable improvement, in general, people everywhere are living longer, healthier lives than at any time in history.

### 2. What makes someone rich or poor?

(A)

When I was growing up, my family never had any money, but all of our neighbors were in the same position, so we never thought we were poor. We were quite rich, in fact, in everything except money. The whole family had to work, but we never went hungry; we didn't have any fancy new clothes, but we were never naked. In many ways, though now I am much better off financially, I miss those days and believe that they were the best time of my life.

(B)

There may be *absolute* measurements of poverty — having a minimum number of calories consumed each day, for instance — but most of our notions about poverty are *comparative*. If I drive around in a ten-year-old car, get new clothes once or twice a year, and have ready *access* to a phone, TV, and a computer, I might think I am poor because my neighbors own two or three new cars, constantly wear the latest fashions and jewelry, and live in a large house that is fully equipped with all the modern *gadgets*. But, all over the world, my own humble life style would be the envy of millions of people without work, without any material possessions at all, and without hope. It is all relative, really.

### 3. The poor are often said to be lazy. Is this a true observation or just a prejudice?

(A)

Of course they're lazy! I don't believe it is possible that anyone with any *gumption* at all, who is willing to accept any honest job offered, is forced to remain in poverty. What many of these people want is a *hand-out*, not a helping hand.

(B)

I know many poor people who have the worst jobs imaginable — dirty, dangerous, difficult, *depressing* — and *barely* make a decent living. They work long, hard hours and have neither the time nor the *inclination* to spend their money on foolish things. And yet you claim you would rather starve than work for such a low wage or have such a *degrading* occupation. Which one of you is the lazy one?

### 4. The rich are often said to be selfish. Is this true or a generalization?

(A)

I have never met any really wealthy people who weren't extraordinarily cheap. They can afford anything they want, but purposely *get by* on as little as possible. Instead of spending their money, they invest it all, so they never have any cash. When they die, their heirs will be very wealthy and will perhaps live happier lives by spending the money on *pleasurable* things.

(B)

"All" rich people are not alike. Many are indeed selfish, just as many poor people are. But others are extraordinarily generous and have the *means* to put their generosity to work for the *betterment* of others. They *fund* charities, museums, hospitals, schools, and social services of all sorts.

# Speak Your Mind

## Speak Your Mind Helpers

5. Poverty, like wealth, is often said to be inherited. Can you explain what that means?

(A)

Poverty is as much a matter of attitude as it is an actual lack of money. People who are poor are poorly educated, lack medical care, and depend on other people for their *sustenance*. Their children then, growing up in that environment of *dependency*, become exactly like them. It is very hard to break out of the cycle of poverty without some sense of possibility of doing so.

(B)

We all start out in life with our own advantages and disadvantages. To some extent we inherit our parents' intelligence, status, possessions, and attitudes, but we use them or abuse them on our own. In the end what matters is how we apply the resources available to us, not how we acquire those resources.

6. What are some of the potential social problems when poverty skyrockets?

(A)

Hungry, oppressed people are driven by circumstance to seek to destroy the system that *exploits* them. They may be willing to endure their poverty if they are convinced that no one is unfairly living well, at their expense, but once they become convinced that the rich and powerful are *profiting* from their *despair*, the situation is *ripe* for revolution.

(B)

No matter how rich I may be as an individual, I am diminished by the *filth*, ignorance, and disease of others. If I have a *disposable income* that is capable of making myself overweight, how can I in good conscience allow a child to starve? For many, the answer is that they grow *callous* to their consciences. The *degradation* that we ignore becomes ours as we lose our connection to the rest of humanity.

## 7. Is society responsible for the poor?

F : We must do something to *eliminate* poverty.

M : It's not our problem.

F : Of course it's our problem! How can you *sit back* and let babies starve?

M : There are too many starving babies for me to feed, and new ones are being born all the time. I work hard to make sure that my own babies are not starving, and I don't have any resources left to feed the millions who are. If their parents worked as hard taking care of their children as I do mine, they wouldn't have to worry about their babies starving; the problem would take care of itself.

F : That's just blaming the victim instead of working to solve the problem.

M : Don't you have any problems at home that need to be fixed? Why don't you spend your energy taking care of your own problems and stop worrying about the problems of others? If everyone would do that, there would be fewer problems.

F : I'm fully capable of taking care of my own problems, thank you. But I also feel that we have an obligation to help those who, through no fault of their own, can't properly take care of theirs.

M : And what do you propose to do about it?

F : A modest tax on everyone — the price of a DVD every week, let's say — would provide an enormous fund. We could use that money to buy food, build houses, establish schools and hospitals. We could end or greatly reduce poverty in just a generation.

M : As long as I can remember, people have told me that. In my lifetime, billions of dollars have been spent and thousands of organizations have been created to fight poverty. But it seems to me that the basic situation hasn't changed a bit. To me, that just shows that all of that money has been wasted.

F : No. In addition to poverty relief, the money has *spurred* employment.

M : Thousands of people have gained jobs as a result of these programs, that's true, but none of these jobs went to the poor people themselves, only to the ones raising the money and distributing it. Hardly a *dent* has been made in employing poor people and ending poverty. I don't know, maybe these people enjoy poverty, or at least they enjoy it more than actually doing something about it.

F : They need help to do something about it. I heard you talk about people *lifting themselves up by their own bootstraps* — you just try that sometime and you'll find yourself *flat on the ground*. It's impossible. We all need someone else to lift us up.

M : I don't think it is my responsibility to solve all the world's problems. But if you can show me even one program that actually works as advertised, instead of merely *funneling* funds into the pockets of the rich, I'll gladly think about changing my opinion. Until then, leave me alone, I have my own issues to deal with.

