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January 5, 2004

Executive Summary: Understanding Poverty in Americaby [Robert E. Rector](#) and [Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D.](#)*Executive Summary #1713*

If poverty means lacking nutritious food, adequate warm housing, and clothing for a family, relatively few of the 35 million people identified as being "in poverty" by the Census Bureau could be characterized as poor. While material hardship does exist in the United States, it is quite restricted in scope and severity.

The average "poor" person, as defined by the government, has a living standard far higher than the public imagines. The following are facts about persons defined as "poor" by the Census Bureau, taken from various government reports:

- Forty-six percent of all poor households actually own their own homes. The average home owned by persons classified as poor by the Census Bureau is a three-bedroom house with one-and-a-half baths, a garage, and a porch or patio.
- Seventy-six percent of poor households have air conditioning. By contrast, 30 years ago, only 36 percent of the entire U.S. population enjoyed air conditioning.
- Only 6 percent of poor households are overcrowded. More than two-thirds have more than two rooms per person.
- The typical poor American has more living space than the average individual living in Paris, London, Vienna, Athens, and other cities throughout Europe. (These comparisons

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Contact An Expert**MEDIA INFORMATION LINE:**

(202) 675-1761

Fax: 202.544.6979

MEDIA CONTACTS:**Matthew Streit**

Senior Media Associate

[E-mail](#)

desk: 202.608.6156

cell: 202.439.0271

Aerica Veazey

International Communications Associate

[E-mail](#)

desk: 202.608.6153

cell: 202.439.6175

Elizabeth Fulk

Senior Media Associate

[E-mail](#)

are to the average citizens in foreign countries, not to those classified as poor.)

- Nearly three-quarters of poor households own a car; 30 percent own two or more cars.
- Ninety-seven percent of poor households have a color television; over half own two or more color televisions.
- Seventy-eight percent have a VCR or DVD player; 62 percent have cable or satellite TV reception.
- Seventy-three percent own microwave ovens, more than half have a stereo, and a third have an automatic dishwasher.

Overall, the typical American defined as poor by the government has a car, air conditioning, a refrigerator, a stove, a clothes washer and dryer, and a microwave. He has two color televisions, cable or satellite TV reception, a VCR or DVD player, and a stereo. He is able to obtain medical care. His home is in good repair and is not overcrowded. By his own report, his family is not hungry, and he had sufficient funds in the past year to meet his family's essential needs. While this individual's life is not opulent, it is equally far from the popular images of dire poverty conveyed by the press, liberal activists, and politicians.

Of course, the living conditions of the average poor American should not be taken as representing all of the nation's poor: There is a wide range of living conditions among the poor. In contrast to the 25 percent of "poor" households that have cell phones and telephone answering machines, approximately one-tenth of families in poverty have no phone at all. While the majority of poor households do not experience significant material problems, roughly a third do experience at least one problem such as overcrowding, temporary hunger, or difficulty getting medical care.

The good news is that the poverty that does exist in the United States can readily be reduced, particularly among children. There are two main reasons that American children are poor: Their parents don't work much, and their fathers are absent from the home.

In both good and bad economic environments, the typical American poor family with children is supported by only 800 hours of work during a year--the equivalent of 16 hours of work per week. If work in each family were raised to 2,000 hours per year--the equivalent of one adult working 40 hours per week throughout the year--nearly 75 percent of poor children would be lifted out of official poverty.

desk: 202.608.6157
cell: 202.445.4041

FOR OP-EDS:

Paul Gallagher
Manager of Editorial Services
[E-mail](#)

desk: 202.608.6151
cell: 202.439.6687

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As noted above, father absence is another major cause of child poverty. Nearly two-thirds of poor children reside in single-parent homes; each year, an additional 1.3 million children are born out of wedlock. If poor mothers married the fathers of their children, nearly three-quarters of the nation's impoverished youth would immediately be lifted out of poverty.

Yet, although work and marriage are reliable ladders out of poverty, the welfare system perversely remains hostile to both. Major programs such as food stamps, public housing, and Medicaid continue to reward idleness and penalize marriage. If welfare could be turned around to encourage work and marriage, the nation's remaining poverty would quickly be reduced. This is, perhaps, the best news about poverty in the United States.

[Robert E. Rector](#) is Senior Research Fellow in Domestic Policy Studies and [Kirk A. Johnson, Ph.D.](#), is Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Fellow in Statistical Welfare Research in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation.