

# Poverty and Addiction Examined

By Jim Rachels



Many people are living at or below the poverty line. This makes someone's life almost unbearable at times. Not having food, shelter, shoes, and clothes can really hurt a person emotionally and mentally. This situation can add a lot of stress to anyone's life and that stress than sometimes can turn into addiction issues. It has also been shown that someone living in poverty while growing up has a much better chance of psychiatric issues such as anxiety, depression, ADHD and substance use disorders. So poverty can affect almost all aspects of your life or at least feel that way.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has said that as much as 40% of homeless Americans live with an alcohol use disorder and that 25% struggle with other types of drugs such as crack, heroin, cocaine and crystal meth.

The first question I think we should be asking is "does poverty have an effect on addiction issues?"

And based on research it seems to me that there is an effect that poverty does have on people that are facing addiction issues. Some believe that poverty can be passed on from generation to generation. And there could be a number of reasons this happens. Poverty can affect your emotional and mental stability leading to more difficulties in life. Some people are stuck in poverty because of their addiction and in some cases the addiction causes poverty. As far as being passed down from generation to generation this happens as these kids are starting life having to fight for everything. Many families that do have many will help their children get a head start in life. They will do this by paying for things like a car, sports and college when the child is of age. Children in poverty do not have this and this makes it much more difficult to pull themselves out of poverty.

Lower income families are at a higher risk of dealing with addiction issues. For example, someone making less than \$20,000 a year is three times more likely to have a heroin addiction versus somebody that is making \$50,000 per year. And making more money also leads to better access to treatment and rehab facilities making it that much easier for people with more money to get better treatment.

And once someone is addicted it is much harder to move up in life financially. And there can be many reasons for this. One is the unemployment rate among addicts is pretty high compared to the population. Or many times people are employed but they miss a lot of work do things like being hungover. And the main reason for having financial difficulties is they spend a considerable amount of money on their addiction. Some people put paying for their drugs and alcohol first, and this leads to other bills not being paid. Because of this many children and

families go without basic necessities including food, electricity and shelter.

There are many things that happen as a result of someone's addiction. One thing is that poverty leads some to lose hope of something good happening to them. Poverty can be seen as one of many contributing factors to someone having addiction issues. Some other contributing factors to poverty are things like literacy level, education, unemployment, and income inequality.

It has been shown that children who have low-income parents are affected heavily by this. It's almost as if the parents have passed their trouble on to them. Children of low-income parents are known to act out, behave impulsively, and lack certain coping skills. It also affects them physically. They develop less grey matter in the front of their brain and this part of the brain is responsible for cognitive functioning. Cognitive functioning can be things like problem-solving, planning organizing, and focusing. And all of these things will follow children into adulthood. So this will lead someone to not being able to make it out on their own without some type of help.

So this can be compared to someone taking on the traits of their parents. Someone who is under the constant stress of living in a household that is living under the poverty line can take an immense toll on the children living in that house. And these things add up and when the child is in school they are not operating at 100% as so many children don't get the proper sleep and even go hungry sometimes. This leads to poor performance and attendance at school. And this can follow a child all the way through high school hurting their chances of ever progressing forward and getting into college. This is an all too common story when it comes to children dealing with poverty.

There are times when people are unable to pay their bills and this can lead to an extreme amount of stress. And sometimes this goes on for months and months and then eventually turns into years with no sign of anything changing. And having all this stress in their life can lead them towards drugs and alcohol. Just imagine the feeling of knowing that you will have to go without electricity and your heat or air conditioning and you don't know where you are going to get the money to pay these bills. And your children will be suffering right alongside you. These stressors add up and can do damage over time if not dealt with.

This ends up leaving people feeling hopeless. This is something that negatively affects someone's mental health and leads them to either start their drug use or continue on with their addiction. Mental health is heavily affected when someone is struggling with poverty. And in these communities, there is very little if no access to mental health programs to

help assist with their needs. People that would be affected are people that have things like anxiety and depression. And having mental health issues alongside all types of stress such as financial stress can also lead to drug use and alcoholism. And without the help of some type of mental health programs these people will start using drugs to self-medicate to calm their symptoms even if it is only temporary.

Some people are employed full-time and still struggle to stay anywhere close to the poverty line. Right now in the United States, the poverty line for a one-person household is \$12,880, and going up for four people the poverty line is \$26,500. In my mind, these are extremely low wages to try to find somewhere to live, a car, and be able to pay all your bills. Especially for someone with a family where they need to provide for others.

Something else that is affected is someone's self-esteem. Many people have extremely low self-esteem from living in a low-income situation. It's hard, especially for children, it's hard for them to accept that they can't have the nicer things that other kids have. They may have clothes that are handed down or maybe from the local goodwill that fit poorly and is old and fading. Same thing with their toys. So these children grow up differently than those who are considered middle-class and above. And these children will also have self-esteem issues later on in life.

So just because you are employed full-time doesn't mean you're going to be able to survive on that income. Some people are working menial jobs where they are never going to earn enough to pay their own way. This then also leads many to a life of crime to help with their income. Sometimes this is a way to get some fast cash. But this then makes the person risk their freedom.

Something else that has an impact on someone's ability to earn is someone's mental health. This is something that needs to be looked at if we are to see the entire picture. People with mental health issues tend to have a more difficult time finding and keeping good-paying jobs.

So what can be done to lift someone out of poverty and give them a second chance? I think we need to really put more effort into helping these people with their job search efforts. For many, substance abuse has made it impossible for them to hold down a job. We need to have resources available for each step in this process. That means helping to get and keep people sober so this way they can go and look for employment and actually be hireable candidates with something to offer.

So as of right now, there are resources available to assist someone in getting sober. There are a few different options and they may not be perfect but for now, it's all we have until hopefully one day the entire system gets an overhaul.

