

How Social Workers Can Address Poverty in America

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Abstract: During this era of growing inequality in America, social workers must address systemic poverty. This article includes a collaboration between a social work assistant professor and undergraduate student regarding how the profession can approach the topic of poverty in America. Our collaboration allowed both of us to consider how important it is for social workers to engage in advocacy efforts to fight against the extreme levels of poverty in America, which are experienced most frequently among people with marginalized identities. We also explore how our life experiences and families influenced our awareness about poverty in America, and subsequently, created a desire to fight for a fairer world grounded in economic, racial, and social justice. Ultimately, this experience crystalized our belief that social work education must involve students and professors working together to address poverty in America, a generational struggle of which social workers must be a part.

Keywords: social work education, poverty, economic justice, advocacy, social policy

Introduction

While the list of social problems in America is a long and painful one, living in poverty is a consistent theme running through many of our country's issues. Poverty not only creates income- and health-related challenges, it exacerbates inequality. Certain populations are disproportionately affected by poverty due to the structural oppression that has haunted America since its inception (United Nations General Assembly, 2018). At our best, social workers advocate for equality as well as the elimination of discriminatory systems (Kirk & Reid, 2002). Now, as activists across the country call for structural changes to address America's high rate of poverty, we believe social workers have a professional responsibility to participate in this movement for economic justice.

In this paper, an assistant professor of social work (Jordan) and an undergraduate social work student (Angeline) consider our roles in reducing poverty in America. Our collaboration began after I (Angeline) was a student in two of Jordan's social policy courses in which the consequences of poverty were among the main topics. After the courses were over, I applied for and received an internal research grant to work with Jordan on a literature review to study how the topic of poverty is covered in bachelor's- and master's-level social work education. The project evolved into an opportunity for us to examine not only our own missions for economic justice, but also the political nature of social work. Through our project, we recognized more clearly that social workers need to advocate for structural and political changes within society. We begin this paper by discussing our professional missions as social workers and how our political and personal beliefs about poverty were influenced by our family backgrounds and social work education. Second, we comment on the existing research on how social work education is preparing students to work at reducing poverty. Finally, we close with a discussion on the importance of social workers creating change to address issues of poverty—ideas which were generated through our work together on this project.

Developing a Passion for Social Work and Economic Justice

After completing our project together, we recognized that advocacy for economic and social justice is the cornerstone of our professional mission as social workers. However, we also found that our paths to this realization were considerably different. My (Angeline's) path emerged from the influence of my family. My aunt is a social worker who, growing up, exposed me to the caring and thoughtful perspectives that social workers offer; she also debunked the negative stereotype of social workers doing impossible work for little pay. My parents provided me with an understanding of how people should offer opportunities and resources to individuals living in poverty, which is one of the main reasons I decided to become a social worker. My parents welcomed a family friend into our home when she was having financial struggles and would otherwise be homeless. For several years, my family volunteered their time by preparing and serving meals for people experiencing homelessness. Through these actions, my family showed how to care for others without judgment. I then became aware of how those experiencing poverty have more limited opportunities and available services, cementing my belief in the need for economic justice. This underlying awareness of poverty and experience with this population taught me to view poverty through an empathic lens. These beliefs have only been strengthened through my time in the BSW program, which has provided me with additional knowledge and skills to advocate for economic justice. I learned about the disproportionate barriers low-income individuals and families face and the reality that escaping poverty is not a simple feat based solely on merit. The combination of a family background in service and learning about deeply rooted inequality in college gave me the momentum to continue my education and start conversations about poverty and injustice in my personal life. Having discussions in class and reading research about the sheer amount of people living in poverty versus the accumulated wealth of the select few made me realize the importance of educating others and having a more active role in economic change.

On the other hand, I (Jordan) did not grow up with a social worker in my family, or someone to have discussions with about poverty and economic justice. While my parents were both first generation college graduates and helping professionals (a nurse and a primary care doctor) who worked in low-income neighborhoods and regularly provided financial support to friends and family members in need, they approached social problems on an individual level and therefore did not have conversations with me about poverty or systemic oppression. In the suburban Pittsburgh community where I grew up, people tended to “blame the victim”—individuals experiencing poverty were viewed as responsible for their own struggle. While my parents did not actively embrace the belief system of their surrounding community, they did not speak out against it either. As a result, although I have vivid memories of my parents showing incredible kindness and generosity to their patients, such as holding free medical care events for low-income older adults every year, I also recall them exposing me to right-wing media on radio and television, spaces where empathy for the disadvantaged and an understanding of systemic oppression were completely absent from the dialogue. As such, I was only able to understand the topic of poverty in America after attending social work school and working for six years as a child and family therapist in marginalized communities. I draw upon this transformative experience when teaching students about the need for more social policies that foster economic justice. I believe my experiences can serve as an example for students who may have not yet recognized how poverty is related to systemic oppression or that policies are needed to provide

more opportunity and resources to disenfranchised populations. I view myself as someone who was exposed to the importance of helping others on an individual level, but only saw the light about the need for systemic changes after attending social work school. To some extent, I believe this personal experience shows that people can be “shown the light” about economic justice even if they weren’t exposed to it while growing up.

Although our paths were different, we both recognize that our professional objectives as social workers must include advocating for major changes to reduce inequality in America. Some social workers undoubtedly were fortunate, like Angeline, to have parents who taught them about economic justice, whereas others had experiences similar to myself (Jordan). Perhaps our work together on this project provides an example of how each social worker must examine their own path to understanding the need to advocate for economic justice.

Our Missions for Economic Justice

This project allowed us the opportunity to apply the topic of economic justice to our current and future professional work. I (Angeline) am in my final year of the BSW program and cannot predict exactly where my career will begin, but I have an interest in mental health and realize that poverty can be a major stressor that affects mental wellbeing. My goal is to help others in therapy sessions and inform any clients experiencing poverty of what resources are available to them. I believe that social workers, through connecting others to services they need, help people by giving clients their own voice and choice to make the best decision for themselves. This is especially true in cases of poverty, as each individual and family situation has specific needs to be met. While I have limited experience working with those living in poverty, social work education has taught me how America’s history and current policies affect poor and marginalized populations. Our project revealed that poverty is often not the main topic of courses, but it runs through as a common theme in most social work classes. I realized how important this all-encompassing issue of poverty is when many political decisions are made and how many misconceptions the public has about poverty and earned success. For me, choosing a career in social work is being a guide and advocate to those who face systemic barriers such as institutional racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. I believe that empathy towards others is a crucial step in addressing the issue of poverty on both a micro- and macro-level in America. Learning about poverty in America has motivated me to be more informed on current events and the conditions confronting marginalized populations so that I can create changes with my vote. When I start my career as a social worker, I plan to conduct more research on policies that allow for equal access to mental health treatment. I believe that social workers must have the empathy and training needed to understand how difficult living in poverty can be and to develop skills needed to work with this population.

I (Jordan) believe my professional mission is to prepare students to promote economic justice. This involves educating students on policies and practices that can reduce poverty in America, as well as the need to change the historical systems of oppression that create and sustain inequality. Although the courses I teach always include content on oppression in American society, I remind students to not give in to despair. We must maintain a belief in societal change. I believe this hope for a better tomorrow is essential and is in keeping with the many social workers and activists throughout history who have helped create progress for populations in need.

Additionally, I utilize my position as a university professor to get more involved in local government and community issues. Right now, this includes communicating with the local leaders and organizations responsible for implementing programs to help populations experiencing poverty, as well as participating in activism around social and economic justice. I have written several opinion pieces in a local newspaper related to the lack of attention toward the high rates of poverty within the area; these articles have been well-received by many within the community. I have also started to build relationships with local leaders and am committed to taking on a community leadership role in the future. I am doing this not only to assist with the work of addressing poverty, but to show my students why social workers should get involved in local policy issues. Given our profession's commitment to economic justice, I believe social workers need a seat at the negotiating table when key decisions are made on issues affecting populations experiencing poverty. I consider it a great honor to teach students who are excited to enter the field and make positive changes in society, and I believe education plays a vital role in accomplishing the field's mission.

Social Work Education on Poverty

Working together on this project not only provided an opportunity to consider our professional missions as social workers, but also gave us the chance to review research on how poverty is taught in bachelor- and master-level social work educational programs. We believe poverty should be covered in a comprehensive manner within social work education, especially since a previous study of the top fifty U.S. social work schools indicated that fewer than one-quarter of them offered more than one course on poverty (Harding et al., 2005). Fortunately, our review of the available research yielded several suggestions by social work educators on how to incorporate poverty-based curriculum in the classroom, which we found reassuring. Social work researchers have published articles indicating that several instructional techniques are effective at teaching students how to understand and address poverty in America—including poverty simulations, volunteering at homeless shelters, assisting clients in accessing public assistance, education on the devious financial services that target poorer communities, and expanding technological skills to increase employment opportunities in lower income areas (Eamon et al., 2013; Hitchcock et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2018; Karger, 2015; Keeney et al., 2019; McNutt et al., 2001; Robinson, 2018; Vandsburger et al., 2010). In addition, we found that several key elements are critical to social workers playing a more active role in creating systemic changes. To be involved, social workers need education on the causes and consequences of poverty, knowledge on how to assist clients experiencing poverty, and recognition of the need for policies to expand economic justice within society.

After we reviewed the literature on poverty education in social work, our discussions with one another revolved around the necessity of teaching social work students about future policy solutions that will expand economic justice. The policies we discussed were vast, but some of the major ones included a \$15 minimum wage; universal basic income for all U.S. citizens; national healthcare through “Medicare for All”; access to affordable childcare; paid maternity leave; a “Green New Deal” to create millions of clean energy jobs; and significantly more funding for employment, education, mental health programs, and housing in lower income communities (Dillon & DelCarlino, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2019; Ray, 2020; Rebell & Wolff, 2017; Zipperer, 2019). We recognize these suggestions are met with immediate derisions in

some circles due to the tax money required to fund them. However, we believe they could easily be implemented through diverting tax dollars from the U.S. military, prison, and criminal justice systems, all of which are funded at the highest rates of any country in the world (United Nations General Assembly, 2018), in addition to requiring the wealthiest Americans to pay their fair share in taxes. Moreover, through investing more of the additional tax revenue in communities with high populations of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, it would be possible to address the long-standing effects of systemic racism and oppression.

Overall, reviewing the research on how social work education is currently addressing the topic of poverty made us reflect on our own experiences in social work education. We believe it is essential for students and educators to have conversation in social work education programs on addressing poverty and translate these skills into advocacy. Without an open discussion about the reality of income inequality, systemic racism, and the cycle of poverty, change will not happen. Our experiences as students in social work programs were transformational because they provided us space to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to advocate for needed changes. It is our hope that other social work students have similar experiences, and that educators take the needed time to create these types of learning environments.

Social Work is Needed Now More than Ever

This project provided us the opportunity to consider the responsibility of social workers in expanding economic justice. We would like to close with some thoughts on the role of social workers in today's society. As was mentioned briefly in Angeline's reflection, many in the lay public hold a stereotypical view about social workers, believing that we are doing impossible work that has little chance of addressing the structural inequalities afflicting American society. We believe this damaging stereotype is one of the main reasons why America has failed to make strides in reversing the country's exceedingly high rates of poverty. Specifically, instead of recognizing the great value of having a profession such as social work that is dedicated to supporting marginalized populations, some people diminish the necessity of providing more programs and policies to address poverty and inequality. Nevertheless, the truth is that social workers are needed now more than ever, and our field should be given greater compensation and resources for the work we do. In order for economic justice to occur within our country, social workers should be recognized through higher pay and more funding to develop programs grounded in economic justice and opportunity. The alternative is a more persistent level of poverty, inequality, and ultimately, death.

Fortunately, we are encouraged that progressive activists from across the country are leading a national movement that offers some measure of hope for economic justice. In fact, some say this generation of young adults in America is the most progressive and justice-oriented in our country's history. As such, we believe social workers need to join this movement and proudly push economic justice forward by getting involved in the political process in their communities and advocating for more resources and opportunities across society. We must not allow the gross level of economic inequality currently taking place in our country to stop our desire for change, but instead confront these issues with knowledge, passion, and compassion. In short, in an era of devastating social inequality and poverty, a field such as social work that is dedicated to economic and social justice has the unique ability to empower populations and should be

emboldened to make these changes. This is an issue we believe all social workers, social work educational programs, and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) should push forward. It is our time to take a stand on behalf of ourselves, our principles, and the clients to whom we are of service.

We believe the next generation of social workers can make groundbreaking progress toward the creation of economic justice. Social work educators, therefore, have a responsibility to inspire students to make transformational changes upon entering the field, on both a micro- and macro-level. Through this project, we came to firmly believe that social work classrooms ought to include political activism, poverty simulations, volunteer opportunities, and the development of skills for students to address the intersectional factors that result in certain populations experiencing more poverty and oppression, skills such as empowerment, advocacy, and connecting clients to available resources and social programs. While many social work educators and students are undoubtedly engaging in this type of work already, we believe more work is needed. It will take great courage and empathy for structural changes to happen, and we look forward to doing our part to make this country a better place.

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