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Sam believes that the first step to eradicating poverty is to thoroughly understand poverty and be able to define it. Since he believes most of the definitions that have been offered in the past only touch the surface of poverty's definition, in this paper, he offers a new definition for this condition.

SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS, THE POOR

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For nearly the past half of the century, poverty and the problems it imposes on the citizens in the United States has been an unpopular topic of discussion. As we move through the first decade of the twenty-first century, and the American society continues its general progressive and evolutionary pattern in areas such as embracing women's rights, African American rights, recognizing individuals' liberties, and attempting to fight the challenges, such as terrorism, poverty yet remains real, devastating, and unattended. Many elements contribute to the survival of this harsh reality. In order to understand the meaning of poverty, it is necessary to first discuss the different definitions associated with it, and then proceed to analyze the reasons behind the society's apathy toward poverty.

There is no one definition for poverty unanimously agreed upon to be exact by everyone. There are no sharp lines separating the poor from the rest of the society. In general terms, however, one can describe poverty as a condition in which an individual is unable, or struggles, to meet basic living needs, such as food and shelter. This condition could apply to unemployed individuals, or the employed who does not earn enough income to satisfy those needs. The United States government uses the measurement of the "poverty threshold," initially developed by Ms. Orshansky in 1955,¹ to define poverty. Poverty threshold is calculated by taking the dollar cost of the family food plan,² which is adjusted by the Consumer Price Index, and

¹ Gordon, Fisher M, *The development and History of the U.S. Poverty Thresholds – a Brief Overview*

² The cheapest of the four food plans developed by the department of agriculture, described by the department of agriculture as "designed for temporary or emergency use when funds are low."

multiplying it by three.³ . Various views surround different aspects of these definitions of poverty, which shall be discussed.

One of the elements in the above method of defining poverty which is questioned by critics is the ever-changing portion of a household's income which is used to provide food. Even though in 1955, individuals spent approximately a third of their income on food, critics argue, this ratio has changed dramatically through out the past fifty years. For instance they argue that the cost of housing has gone up dramatically, hence resulting in individuals and families to spend a lesser portion of their income on food. The proponents of this view argue that if this change of ratio were considered in defining poverty, it would have a large impact society's perception of what poverty really is today.

There are also different views surrounding the standards of living. Some critics of the "poverty threshold" method question, "what need is considered a basic need?" About fifty years ago, a car would have been considered a luxury, and a high school education would have probably been enough to enter the job market. In the twenty-first century, however, a car, a TV, and college education are considered necessities. This group of analysts assert that as the society's general standards of living rises, so should the poor's. Such change was proposed to the Bureau of Budget Review Committee, in 1968, but the committee refused to make such adjustment.⁴

As different definitions of poverty give us an idea of the living conditions and limitations it imposes on the poor, it is imperative to understand some of the reasons that cause one to stay poor, or fall into poverty. It is important to observe that the majority of the cases of poverty fall under three major classes, which shall be explained in character. These classes are: general poverty, targeted poverty, and intermittent poverty.

³ Families of three or more persons spent about one third of their after-tax money income on food in 1955.

⁴ Gordon, Fisher M, *The development and History of the U.S. Poverty Thresholds – a Brief Overview*

General poverty is one of the major classes of poverty. This class includes the individuals in the society who stay in, or fall into, poverty as a result of the general economic factors and phenomena that affect the economy over-time. For instance one of important elements that contribute to the general poverty is the imbalance between the rise of one's income, and her expenses. It is generally accepted that the costs of goods in any society, including ours, are affected by inflation. This inflation rate, although differs from year to year, has consistently pushed the general prices up, including prices of "basic needs." However, it is evident that the individuals' incomes, although rising periodically as well, never keep up with inflation. Overtime, this imbalance result in one's struggle to meet ends, pushing him below the poverty threshold. The so-called general poverty affects every individual who fails to counterforce these general phenomena.

Targeted poverty is categorical in nature, affecting specific groups in the society, as opposed to general poverty. These categories include race, sex, gender and age. An example is the income inequality among women and men. In America, A woman working at a job makes, on average, seventy-four percent of a man doing the same job. This unfair income inequality targets women, making them more vulnerable to falling under the level of poverty. Another example of this kind of poverty involves race. In an article titled "Getting to Average," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. speaks about the great days for the black working class at a time when factory jobs were plentiful. However when the service economy gradually replaced a big part of the manufacturing sector, it targeted the black work force in the manufacturing sector, pushing them to lose jobs and consequently be exposed to poverty. The above phenomenon, one could assert, also affected everyone in the manufacturing sector, which is also considered categorical in nature. President George Bush's tax-cut policy for the wealthiest could also be considered as a factor contributing to targeted poverty, affecting mostly the middleclass, pushing them into poverty, as the numbers indicate in the latest U.S. Census Bureau report.

The last, and the only class of poverty most usually addressed effectively in the relative short-term, is intermittent poverty. This kind of poverty could be characterized as one that occurs after a major dysfunctional factor disturbs the economy and the flow of income and expenses, such as a recession or a depression, causing the majority to lose jobs and lack funds. Such class of poverty affects the majority of the society. As a result, since the middleclass, who is also the majority of the population, are suffering, the government usually responds effectively (possibly for political incentives) to fix the general situation back to “normal.” As a result, this kind of poverty is usually the most short-lived. A good instance is the great depression of 1929, which pushed tens of millions of Americans below levels of poverty.⁵ It was such devastation that caused the proposal of the “New Deal” by Franklin Roosevelt, which marked the beginning of welfare in the United States. If the stock market had not crashed in 1929, it would have been most unlikely that the government would still take such stanch measures to fix the problem of poverty.

As it is apparent, despite debates and uncertainties over what would be the right definitions of poverty, and no matter what class of poverty is affecting an individual, the effects are destructive. Consequently, one wonders, given the society’s agreement on the general concept of poverty, and the harsh living conditions brought by it, why is it that the majority do not react resolutely in solving this devastating phenomenon affecting the lives of tens of millions of American citizens. One should look deeply through the cores of our society to identify those factors, which are to be analyzed.

One of the main reasons for ineffective response to poverty is the society’s misconceptions surrounding the victims of poverty. Regrettably, the majority of our society put the blame of poverty on its victims themselves. The general stereotypes consider the poor to be lazy, afraid to work, a menace to the society, and associate poverty with drug addicts and

⁵ Trattner, Walter I., *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A history of Social Welfare in America*

alcoholics. Although to some extent this might be true, in fact, the majority of the poor are poor because they have been deprived from having the opportunity to progress as the society rejects them, or fails to see them completely.

Yet a more major reason that poverty has not been addressed effectively is due to its invisibility. The middleclass, which is the majority in the United States, have achieved the ability to satisfy most basic needs, such as food, clothes, housing, etc. Consequently, aspired by the satisfaction of those needs, they continue to move and think progressively toward becoming affluent. This idea is evident in many of the reality TV shows. The majority of them, such as “Who wants to be a millionaire?,”⁶ “Joe Millionaire,”⁷ and “Apprentice”⁸ nurture the financial ideals of the middleclass, such as becoming a millionaire through apprenticeship, effort, or even marriage. However, it is almost impossible to imagine a primetime TV show where the poor contestants compete for a meal, or the homeless for a night sleep in a warm room. When the majority of the society is looking up to the rich, it is not looking down to see the poor. Hence, the poor - although real – is considered as second-class citizen and put out of sight.

Although there are numerous statements and definitions that would answer the question of what poverty is and some of its characteristics, there is still no one description of this problem that could prove to be the correct one. However, as one reflects upon the reality of poverty, and different aspects and ways in which poverty affects the poor, it becomes perceptible that poverty is real, harsh, and silent. Hence it is only by learning about the ways this problem affect lives, and most importantly, speaking about this unfortunate problem, that we can have hopes of treating its source effectively someday.

⁶ On ABC

⁷ On Fox

⁸ On NBC