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Introduction To Understanding Poverty

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Introduction to Understanding Poverty

Poverty is a Common Experience

Poverty can generally be defined as a lack of resources. More specifically, the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) determines who is experiencing poverty by using income thresholds that vary by family demographics. In 2018, the official poverty rate in the U.S. was 11.8 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). To understand this percentage, it is critical to recognize how the U.S. measures the official poverty rate. The poverty rate only tells us how many people ended up with a net income that falls below the poverty line over the course of the entire year. As a result, the poverty rate does not measure the people who intermittently experienced poverty during that time period. In looking at longitudinal data that measures shorter periods of poverty, over 1/3 (34.5 percent) of the U.S. population had at least one spell of poverty lasting two months or more (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Learning how poverty is measured allows us to go beyond the official poverty rate to understanding the common experiences of poverty.

- 47 percent of the U.S. population is living pay-check to pay-check (Federal Reserve Board, 2020).
- Poverty is not something only others experience, anyone can experience poverty at any time.
- In the U.S., one in six children live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).
- Children experience poverty more than any other age group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Addressing Poverty Through Service Learning

Poverty impacts K-12 students in a number of ways, but we know finding methods to encourage students to continue their education can address the effects of poverty. One way to keep students engaged is service learning. Service learning is a method of teaching that combines classroom instruction with meaningful, community-identified service. Students who participate in service learning projects demonstrate increased school engagement (a factor in maintaining educational attainment) which is often an obstacle for students experiencing poverty. Additionally, schools that sponsored service learning programs reported that attendance increased each year over a three-year period (Service Learning Academy, 2018).

Service learning uses asset-based community engagement to address poverty. Rather than emphasizing deficits, service learning seeks to recognize and utilize the strengths already present within communities. This relationship driven approach emphasizes that everyone in the community has skills, interests, and experiences that can help strengthen their community. Service learning allows students to increase their cultural competence and develop a sense of social responsibility (Baggerly, 2011). How can anti-poverty service learning support your goals for your students?

Further Resources

Looking for more information about the intersection of service learning, education and poverty? For more resources please visit Looking for more information about service learning, education and poverty? For more resources please visit https://www.unomaha.edu/service-learning-academy/priority-areas/anti-poverty-initiative.php. If you are interested in future listening sessions, research sharing, or trainings related to this work, fill out this survey.