



No Poor Among You...

*However, there should be no poor among you,
for in the land your God is giving you
to possess as your inheritance,
God will richly bless you,
if only you fully obey God
and are careful to follow
all these commands I am giving you today.*

– Deut. 15: 4-5



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www.mnwithoutpoverty.org

JRLC works in collaboration with A Minnesota Without Poverty to build the political will to end poverty in Minnesota by 2020.



JRLC works in collaboration with the Half in Ten campaign to cut the national poverty rate in half in ten years.

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Introduction

In the midst of the 2009 recession poverty is worsening, and those who are most in need are not getting the attention they deserve. Candy Hill, the Vice President of Catholic Charities USA, commented, “All the focus is on the middle class – on Wall Street and Main Street – but it’s the people on the back streets who are really suffering.” The recession means many middle class families and individuals are hurting and losing economic stability – job loss is known on every block, in every social circle, but those most affected are the many neighbors who are hungry, unable to afford medical care, losing their housing, dropping out of education, and cast adrift from community life. We as faith communities cannot abandon those who are most in need in times of crisis.

Yet poverty is not just a result of recession. According to the American Community Survey, a yearly survey put out by the US Census Bureau, in 2008, half a million Minnesotans live below the official poverty line, which is set at \$24,050 for a family of four. Although Minnesota’s poverty rate is relatively low in comparison to the rest of the nation, it is still unacceptable. People of faith and congregations should be leaders in the fight to end poverty.

Minnesota’s state government has shown a commitment to ending poverty through the work of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020 (LCEP), which recently made its recommendations. Minnesota’s faith communities should intensify our efforts to work towards ending poverty.

Shared Principles

Each of our faith traditions teaches us that we must care for every member of our community, especially those who are often forgotten. In Minnesota 9.6% of the population live below the official poverty line. Additionally, the poverty rate is much higher in minority communities, female-headed households, and among children. Although we are one of the few states to have an overall poverty rate below ten percent, Minnesota racial minority populations experience poverty at a rate above the national average. We are called to address this particularly Minnesotan injustice.

In addition, many experts agree that the official poverty line greatly underestimates the true number of people in poverty as it is based on outdated measurement criteria. According to the Center for American Progress, current poverty measures are based on standards determined in 1960 that have been updated to reflect inflation but not to reflect changes in household expenses and forms of income such as food assistance and tax credits. For instance, in 1960 food was considered to be one third of household expenses, thus the poverty line was set at three times a “thrifty” food budget. But today food typically makes up one seventh of a family budget. Without accurate measures, it is nearly impossible to properly determine the effectiveness of policies intended to assist with poverty alleviation.

All of our faith traditions call us to serve the poor and vulnerable. We cannot simply abandon those in poverty when times become tough. “Since there will never cease to be someone in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” (Deuteronomy 15:11).

As people of faith we cannot ignore the problem of poverty or pass it off to someone else. The prophet Muhammad says “He who sleeps on a full stomach whilst his neighbor goes hungry is not one of us.” Serving the poor is a foundational belief among Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions and we have to work together.

We must not simply try to alleviate the symptoms of poverty, but address its underlying causes. 1 John 3:17-18 proclaims, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need yet refuses to help? Our love must be not just words or mere talk, but something active and genuine.” Although charity works to lessen immediate needs, we must work at the same time for broad-based social and economic change. This includes working with community groups, non-profit organizations, and local government to change the ways we see and address poverty.

Human Dignity

Human dignity is a core belief of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. People, who are created in God's image, have an inherent dignity and worth that must be protected. Poverty is a violation of this dignity. A Minnesota Without Poverty's Common Foundation states "As people of faith... We believe it is the Creator's intent that all people are provided those things that protect human dignity and make for a healthy life: adequate food and shelter, meaningful work, safe communities, healthcare, and education." The Islamic Development Bank in 2005 recognized "empowerment" as a fundamental dimension of poverty alleviation and made human dignity a cornerstone of the Bank's agenda.

Not only does poverty itself violate human dignity, but society's perception of poverty and people in poverty further damages human dignity and self worth. Many assume that people in poverty are lazy, have made irresponsible choices, or simply want a free ride. Often these attitudes emerge from ignorance.

We all must work to change our own perceptions of poverty and encourage those in our congregations to do the same. The path out of poverty requires not just charity but the recognition that people in poverty are a valuable part of the community and that they must be a part of the solution and not just a passive recipient. People are not burdens but assets.

When we discuss the poverty in our society we are referring to involuntary poverty, rather than poverty by choice. Involuntary poverty is a state of poverty where one is not able to choose their quality of life because they do not have equal access to resources and opportunities. Someone who chooses to live a simple lifestyle where their income level is below the poverty line has access to the resources and opportunities that would allow them to live above the poverty line.

Common Good

Working for the common good and not just for individual gain is a core belief in our Abrahamic faiths. Poverty is a threat to the common good, which affects Minnesota in many ways: limiting the hopes and opportunities of individuals and stunting the growth of the entire state.

As people of faith we must not simply look out for our own good but for that of our neighbors as well. As the Qur'an proclaims, "Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion:" 16:90. Jane Addams, a Protestant social thinker and activist, said "The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life." We cannot rest comfortably while members of our community suffer.

Poverty weakens not only individuals and families, but also entire communities and the state as a whole; for example, poverty can affect the quality of local infrastructure, economy, and education. Minnesota has a strong "brand" in terms of quality education and the strength of its economy. This reputation attracts students, businesses, and investment. In recent years, our "brand" has weakened with the increase of poverty and the lack of public investment in our people.

Stewardship of Resources

All of our resources come from God and God calls us to be good stewards of Creation. This stewardship includes providing for the poor. Leviticus tells us "You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God" (19:10).

We have not been good stewards. There is a large gap between the haves and have-nots in our country and in our state. The Qur'an tells us, "Whatever Allah has restored to His Apostle from the people of the towns, it is for Allah and for the Apostle, and for the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer, so that it may not be a thing taken by turns among the rich of you..." (59.7) There will always be some difference between the bottom and top, but poverty disproportionately affects groups that are already marginalized and vulnerable. In Minnesota there are great wealth disparities in terms of geography, age, race, ability, and gender.

Who is Poor?

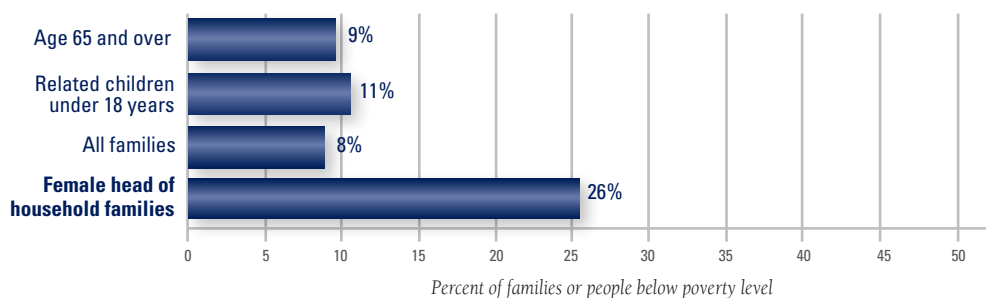
The majority of those living in poverty are employed. The problem is that they do not make enough money to live on, especially if they have additional expenses like health problems and non-working family members to support. Tom Stinson, Minnesota's State Economist, and Tom Gillaspay our State Demographer identified eight characteristics which can be used to describe three-quarters of poor Minnesota households, as is shown in the chart below:

Characteristic of Householder	Percent of Poor	Poverty Rate
Disabled	38%	19%
High School Dropout	36%	26%
Never Married Mom	19%	42%
College Student	18%	23%
Unemployed	15%	31%
Divorced/Separated Mom	12%	20%
Non Citizen	10%	19%
Older Widow	6%	14%

**Note: "Percent of Poor" indicates the percent of people living in poverty with the corresponding characteristic. The total equals over 100% because people can have multiple characteristics.*

Poverty tends to be greatest in urban and rural areas, and less prominent in suburban areas. In Minnesota that means the Twin Cities, particularly the inner city, and rural Minnesota. Poverty is most prevalent in children, young adults, and the elderly. These groups are vulnerable because they often depend on others and have limited if any income.

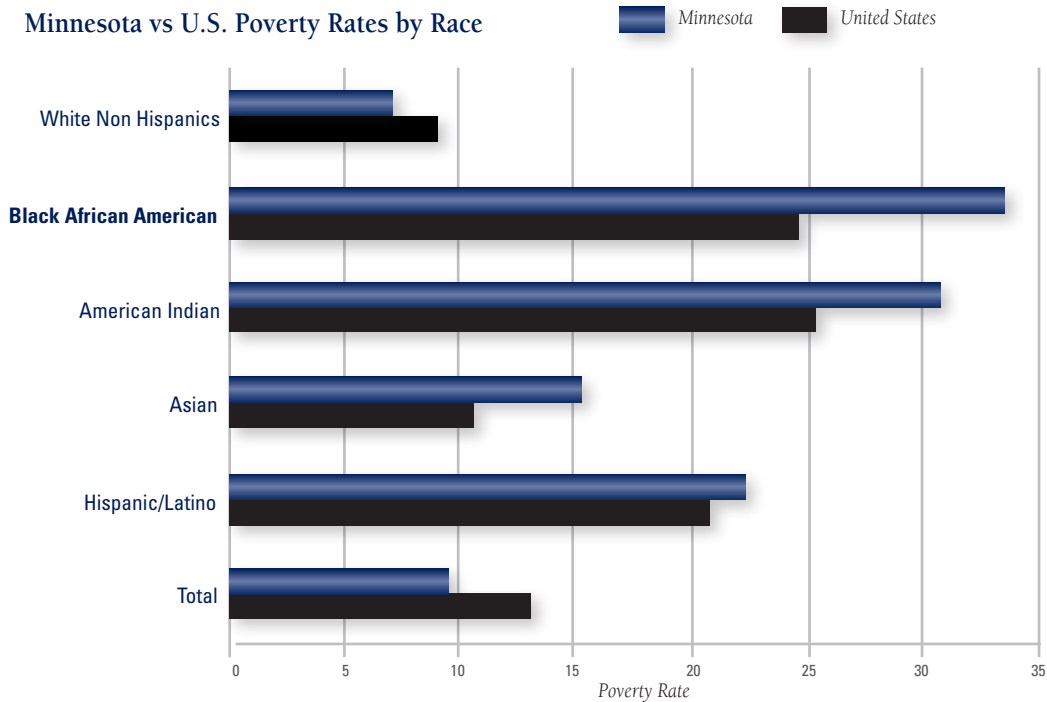
Poverty Rates in Minnesota in 2008



Source: American Community Survey, 2008

Race, Gender, Ability and Poverty

Minnesota as a whole has one of the lowest poverty rates in the country, but when you break down poverty figures by race and ethnicity it paints a very different picture. Only Mississippi and Louisiana have higher poverty rates among African Americans.



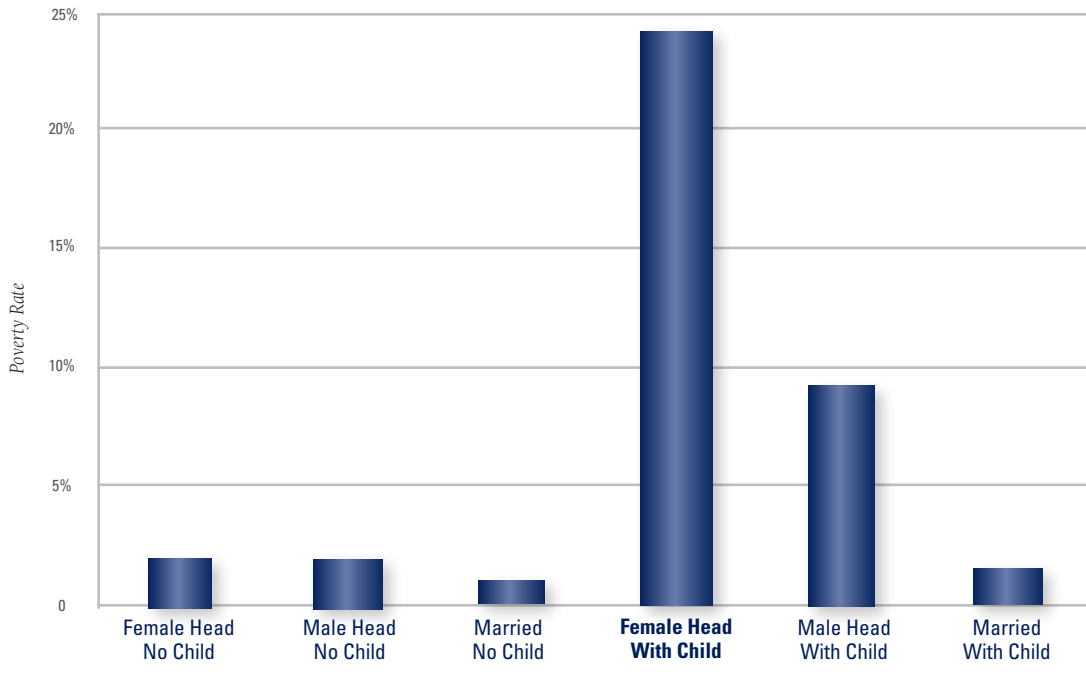
Not only are there stark racial disparities in terms of poverty rates, but there are also disparities in terms of net worth, which is a reflection of financial assets. As the chart below indicates, African American and Latino families' are at a significant disadvantage in comparison to white families. Lack of wealth limits a family's ability to respond to and bounce back from crises. The following national data gives an indication of the wide disparities in assets by racial group.

Racial Group	Net Worth
African American	\$20,600
Latino	\$18,600
White	\$140,700

The connection between poverty and race is extremely complex but it is one that has to be considered as Minnesota's population is growing more diverse every year.

Despite the fact that women’s workplace participation rate is high in Minnesota, women are among the poorest group. 10.6% of Minnesota women are in poverty while only 8.4% of men. Women also tend to earn less than men. Women who work full time earn only 79.3% of what men earn on average. Families with young children headed by a single mother are 12 times more likely to be living in poverty than an equivalent household headed by a married couple.

Poverty Rates by Family Type



People with disabilities are also overlooked as populations that disproportionately suffer from poverty. Based on the 2007 and 2008 American Community Survey, in Minnesota 64.2% of people living with a disability are unemployed, and nationally for people with mental disabilities, the rate of employment is only 27.9%. The poverty rate in Minnesota among people with disabilities is 19.2%, twice the rate of people living without disabilities; for people with mental disabilities the poverty rate nationally is 27.1%. In Minnesota, 9.6% of the population live with disabilities.

Causes of Poverty

The circumstances of poverty differ for everyone, but there are many common causes we can focus on in order to improve the situation as a whole.

One of the biggest problems families and individuals face is that the wages they earn are not enough to live on, especially if they are supporting children or other relatives who are unable to work. Earning wages does not guarantee self-sufficiency. In Minnesota 1.5 million jobs pay wages that are less than the basic needs budget according to the Jobs Now wage calculator for a single full-time, year-round worker supporting one dependent.

Many times the income a family brings in is not enough to balance its many costs such as health care, housing, childcare, transportation, and education costs. If the majority of a family's income goes into paying immediate expenses, that family cannot build financial assets. Without such assets to fall back on, a minor setback can drive such a family into poverty and it is much harder to get out again.

The public assistance programs that are designed to help those in poverty can actually complicate the problem and discourage families from moving to higher paying jobs and building assets necessary for getting out of poverty. According to the Disincentives to Earn report from the Minnesota Center for Public Finance Research, "The combination of rising income tax rates and reduced eligibility for means-tested programs can create situations in which a dollar of additional earned income is partially, totally, or even more than offset by taxes and benefits loss."

People with high levels of education are less likely to live in poverty, while people with little education are more likely to be poor. There is a cyclical relationship between education and poverty. If you are poor you have less access to quality education and with less education it is harder to get out of poverty.

Poverty can be episodic or long term. Episodic poverty is often triggered by a sudden upheaval or misfortune. Long term or chronic poverty is more often due to existing conditions. These two different manifestations of poverty have distinct causes and effects so must be addressed differently.

Call to Community

It is clear from our teachings and traditions that helping the poor is a fundamental principle of our beliefs and cannot be ignored. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* maintains that “The pursuit of economic justice is not an option or an add-on for Catholics; it is part of who we are and what we believe.” While people do not generate enough income to support themselves and their families, cannot afford housing and health care payments, and cannot build enough assets to stabilize their situation we are failing in our stewardship of resources and in our duty to safeguard human dignity.

In order to end poverty, we must come together as communities of faith and support those who are poor and vulnerable. The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism calls “congregations to assess how best to meet the needs of their local communities and their congregants who may be in need, and to engage in advocacy and action at the local, state, and national levels designed to address the cause of poverty and to spur change.”

Ending poverty will need efforts in justice work in addition to charity work. We cannot settle for only alleviating the symptoms of poverty, but also work to fix the causes and perpetuation of poverty in our society.

It is also imperative that we work to transform our own perceptions of poverty and those of our neighbors in community. People in poverty are not simply beneficiaries but indispensable members of our faith communities.

As an inter-faith voice for social justice, JRLC and its sponsoring faith communities are able to work for change within our own communities and at the state level. We have an obligation to protect the poor and vulnerable.

The Legislative Commission to End Poverty has worked with faith groups, non-profits and individuals from across the state in order to create recommendations for the Minnesota Legislature. They made their recommendations in January 2009. It is now our job to make sure that the state government stays true to its commitment to end poverty.

Minnesota Faith Communities Working to End Poverty

Religious congregations and faith-based organizations have been in the center of anti-poverty efforts for all of Minnesota's history. Faith communities sponsor and operate shelters, develop and sustain affordable and supportive housing, health clinics, food shelves, after-school programs, clothes closets, support groups, emergency aid assistance, and countless charitable acts of mercy. Indeed, reaching out to the poor and helping those in need comprises most of the faith community's presence in the world. On a smaller scale, yet profoundly significant for the health of our community, religious organizations raise a prophetic voice when institutional arrangements drift away from justice. Our commitment to God's vision of justice impels us to end the systemic causes of poverty.

Faith communities offer hope and practical perspective to the goal of ending poverty. We start with the understanding the Creation is good; put simply, God gives us a bountiful earth to share with one another. Practically, we know from experience and from careful research that ending poverty is possible. We witness the progress made by small communities with a small infusion of working capital. We celebrate the turn-around of neighborhoods when a community's assets are put to work and attract new investments. We are heartened by policy analysis and academic research that shows that the combined effect of raising the minimum wage, fully funding child care, and increasing refundable earned-income tax credits can reduce poverty in Minnesota by 27%. We know providing better income supports and earning disregards for persons with disabilities could reduce poverty by as much as 40%. To a great extent we know what works and what to do.

Two Critical Paths to End Poverty in Minnesota: Policy and Politics

The policy path: We know what we do!

In the final report of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020, several policy options are explored showing the relative effectiveness of each. Fully funding child care, raising the minimum wage, enhancing refundable tax credits, increasing participation in food assistance programs, and higher education attainment and job training are highlighted. In one simulation these five policy initiatives are all assumed to be mature, fully functioning, and adequately funded. The result? Poverty is reduced by over 27%! These five initiatives, enacted together, form a powerful anti-poverty policy agenda and could quickly move us over a quarter of the way towards ending poverty. Access to affordable health care, streamlined services, asset protection, income assistance for persons with disabilities, person-to-person support, along with improvements in transportation and affordable housing initiatives are other important strategies.

The political path: We are building the political will!

JRLC recommends your involvement in A Minnesota Without Poverty, a statewide movement that first emanated from the faith community and is now growing into a cross-sector movement. The purpose of A Minnesota Without Poverty is to: Build, organize and mobilize a statewide movement to end poverty in Minnesota by 2020. Please learn more at: www.mnwithoutpoverty.org

JRLC is also working nationally with the Half in Ten Campaign, a broad coalition of anti-poverty groups who are working on federal policy to cut the national poverty rate in half by 2020. We realize that Minnesota's goal to end poverty will not be realized without a strong partnership with federal efforts, both governmental and non-governmental. Please visit the Half in Ten website at: www.halfinten.org.

Recommendations for Action

JRLC worked diligently to bring into being and secure funding for the Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020. Our members participated in nearly all the hearings and opportunities to give input to the Commission. We affirm the Commission's outstanding efforts in traveling the state and listening to people experiencing poverty. We also affirm the excellent research and national policy analysis that went into the formation of the Commission's recommendations. As a result of this high-quality and inclusive work, JRLC can support and promote the following recommendations of the LCEP as a first step to ending poverty:

- Restore work as a way out of poverty.
- Increase minimum wage
- Extend child care assistance to more families
- Expand tax credits for working families
- Tax incentives for businesses

Refocus public assistance to streamline services and support everyone's capacity and potential.

- Integrate and automate public services
- Increase participation in food support programs
- Make the eligibility requirements for services more uniform
- Help Minnesotans build and maintain financial assets.
- Develop public assistance policies that encourage maintenance of assets
- Ban predatory financial practices
- Implement financial literacy education in schools
- Restrict use of personal credit information

Revitalize our communities through infrastructure and person-to-person support.

- Increase federal and state support for affordable housing
- Improve access to public transportation
- Develop community-based initiatives to help at-risk youth
- Give support to caregivers

Modernize our system of education to build the best workforce in the nation.

- Enhance early childhood education
- Extend technical education programs
- Implement the Governor's Workforce Development Council Initiatives

Develop an ongoing structure to monitor Minnesota's efforts to end poverty.

- Create and implement a public awareness campaign
- Develop poverty impact statements to assess effects of legislation

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Chart 5: American Community Survey 2007



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