

**Programme: Master in Sociology**

**SEMESTER- III**

**Postgraduate Department of Sociology**

**Patna University, Patna**

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**Compulsory Paper: C.C. 11 (SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN INDIA)**

**UNIT II: POVERTY**

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## **Causes and Effects of Poverty:**

Any discussion of social class and mobility would be incomplete without a discussion of **poverty**, which is defined as the lack of the minimum food and shelter necessary for maintaining life. More specifically, this condition is known as **absolute poverty**. Today it is estimated that more than 35 million Americans—approximately 14 percent of the population—live in poverty. Of course, like all other social science statistics, these are not without controversy. Other estimates of poverty in the United States range from 10 percent to 21 percent, depending on one's political leanings. This is why many sociologists prefer a *relative*, rather than an *absolute*, definition of poverty. According to the definition of **relative poverty**, the poor are those who lack what is needed by most Americans to live decently because they earn less than half of the nation's median income. By this standard, around 20 percent of Americans live in poverty, and this has been the case for at least the past 40 years. Of these 20 percent, 60 percent are from the working class poor.

### **Causes of poverty :**

Poverty is an exceptionally complicated social phenomenon, and trying to discover its causes is equally complicated. The stereotypic (and simplistic) explanation persists—that the poor cause their own poverty—based on the notion that anything is possible in America. Some theorists have accused the poor of having little concern for the future and preferring to “live for the moment”; others have accused them of engaging in self-defeating behavior. Still other theorists have characterized the poor as fatalists, resigning themselves to a **culture of poverty** in which nothing can be done to change their economic

outcomes. In this culture of poverty—which passes from generation to generation—the poor feel negative, inferior, passive, hopeless, and powerless.

The “blame the poor” perspective is stereotypic and not applicable to all of the underclass. Not only are most poor people able and willing to work hard, they do so when given the chance. The real trouble has to do with such problems as minimum wages and lack of access to the education necessary for obtaining a better-paying job.

More recently, sociologists have focused on other theories of poverty. One theory of poverty has to do with the flight of the middle class, including employers, from the cities and into the suburbs. This has limited the opportunities for the inner-city poor to find adequate jobs. According to another theory, the poor would rather receive welfare payments than work in demeaning positions as maids or in fast-food restaurants. As a result of this view, the welfare system has come under increasing attack in recent years.

Again, no simple explanations for or solutions to the problem of poverty exist. Although varying theories abound, sociologists will continue to pay attention to this issue in the years to come.

### **The effects of poverty:**

The effects of poverty are serious. Children who grow up in poverty suffer more persistent, frequent, and severe health problems than do children who grow up under better financial circumstances.

- Many infants born into poverty have a low birth weight, which is associated with many preventable mental and physical disabilities. Not only are these poor infants more likely to be irritable or sickly, they are also more likely to die before their first birthday.
- Children raised in poverty tend to miss school more often because of illness. These children also have a much higher rate of accidents than do other children, and they are twice as likely to have impaired vision and hearing, iron deficiency anemia, and higher than normal levels of lead in the blood, which can impair brain function.

Levels of stress in the family have also been shown to correlate with economic circumstances. Studies during economic recessions indicate

that job loss and subsequent poverty are associated with violence in families, including child and elder abuse. Poor families experience much more stress than middle-class families. Besides financial uncertainty, these families are more likely to be exposed to series of negative events and “bad luck,” including illness, depression, eviction, job loss, criminal victimization, and family death. Parents who experience hard economic times may become excessively punitive and erratic, issuing demands backed by insults, threats, and corporal punishment.

**Homelessness**, or extreme poverty, carries with it a particularly strong set of risks for families, especially children. Compared to children living in poverty but having homes, homeless children are less likely to receive proper nutrition and immunization. Hence, they experience more health problems. Homeless women experience higher rates of low-birth-weight babies, miscarriages, and infant mortality, probably due to not having access to adequate prenatal care for their babies. Homeless families experience even greater life stress than other families, including increased disruption in work, school, family relationships, and friendships.

Sociologists have been particularly concerned about the effects of poverty on the “black underclass,” the increasing numbers of jobless, welfare-dependent African Americans trapped in inner-city ghettos. Many of the industries (textiles, auto, steel) that previously offered employment to the black working class have shut down, while newer industries have relocated to the suburbs. Because most urban jobs either require advanced education or pay minimum wage, unemployment rates for inner-city blacks are high.

Even though Hispanic Americans are almost as likely as African Americans to live in poverty, fewer inner-city Hispanic neighborhoods have undergone the same massive changes as many black neighborhoods have. Middle and working class Hispanic families have not left their *barrio*, or urban Spanish-speaking neighborhood, in large numbers, so most Hispanic cultural and social institutions there remain intact. In addition, local Hispanic-owned businesses and low-skill industries support the *barrio* with wage-based, not welfare-based, businesses.

Climbing out of poverty is difficult for anyone, perhaps because, at its worst, poverty can become a self-perpetuating cycle. Children of poverty are at an extreme disadvantage in the job market; in turn, the lack of

good jobs ensures continued poverty. The cycle ends up repeating itself until the pattern is somehow broken.